

Young people's post-compulsory educational choices in a small rural Tasmanian town

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy (Sociology)
University of Tasmania, April 2015

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April 2015

Acknowledgements

I would like to take this opportunity to recognise that this research would not have been possible had it not been for the continuing support and encouragement of a number of people.

I wish first and foremost to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Associate Professor Daphne Habibis. Your expertise, understanding and patience have been paramount to the success of this thesis. It is a real privilege to have been given the opportunities for personal and professional growth that working with you has resulted in. I remain deeply grateful for your commitment to mentoring me, and sharing this journey with me in good and not so good times. I wish to also thank Associate Professor Maggie Walter for agreeing to join the supervisory team and providing helpful advice.

I extend my sincere gratitude to Associate Professor Kris Natalier for providing advice, support and friendship throughout the research process, and especially for providing constructive feedback on my final draft. Thank you most of all for your always unfailing belief in the importance of this project.

I would like to also thank my friends and colleagues in the Sociology Department of the University of Tasmania, especially Dr. Peta Cook, Dr. Nicholas Hookway, Dr. Brady Robards and Dr. Kim McCleod for their ongoing support and kindness over the course of this project. Thanks also to Jane Emery for diligently and meticulously proof reading this thesis.

I wish to acknowledge the support and friendship of my two amazing friends, Janie Lowde and Christine Padgett. To Janie, thank you for providing me with a physical and intellectual home away from home, and especially for your exquisite dinosaur and car racing skills – not to mention ‘the million leaves’ in your garden! To Christine, thank you for never failing to be around when it was needed the most. Thank you for all the talks about everything and nothing, for

helping me with all the practical things I never had time to do, for never failing to bring cakes back to the office and especially for never running out of ‘balloons and biscuits’ to entertain my son.

A special thank you to my parents for their unconditional love and support, and for helping me to realise my hopes and dreams no matter how strange and impossible they may seem. Thank you especially for your scheduled and unscheduled trips to Australia to help out with all the unplanned things that can happen over the course of a PhD. Thank you for help with childcare, cooking, housework as well as strange and never ending formatting issues.

I would also like to acknowledge the role of my husband, Jamie Oliver, in making this project happen. Thank you for always being by my side, for never complaining about my ever increasing time away from home, and for listening when everything was too unspeakable and too overwhelming. I would like to thank my son, Magnus, who so thoroughly interrupted my life – but who also continues to remind me what is most important in life.

Finally, especially big thanks are due to the staff at the High School who unfortunately must remain anonymous, but who welcomed me to their school and generously allowed me to study it. A special thank you to my young participants, who trusted me with their stories and made this research happen.

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Abstract

Participation in post-compulsory education has increased substantially since the 1970s (ABS 2011), but gender, socio-economic status and locality continue to influence who remains in education and who leaves (ACARA 2012; Curtis and McMillan 2008). This thesis addresses the issue of the low Year 12 completion rates in rural Australia through an investigation of how young people living in a rural area of Tasmania subjectively construct their post-compulsory educational choices. The study is based on participant observation and in-depth interviews with Grade 10 students, parents and teachers in a small rural town as well as interviews with Australian policy makers with the objective of examining how young people aged 15-16 years make plans for their future careers. Bourdieu's (1990) concepts of social and cultural capital and the habitus and Connell's theory of the gender order (2005) are used to analyse participants' experiences.

Key findings include that place was a critical factor in the construction of a distinctive rural habitus characterised by a strong attachment to and relationship with people and place and particular forms of masculinities and femininities. A combination of traditional working class culture and an emphasis on physicality as embodied performance was linked to the dominance of a form of masculinity in the community which was carried across to the informal school culture in ways that influenced both male and female participants' decisions about whether to continue at school.

Decisions to leave school early were linked to the possession of tight-knit local networks, limited travel, and predominantly local forms of knowledge. Those who decided to continue their education were more likely to possess globalised forms of social and cultural capital. For many young men their successful performance of a particular form of place based hegemonic masculinity was in tension with the cultural capital of the School and was associated with an intention to leave education as soon as they could. At the same time, many of these respondents believed that in making this choice, they were setting themselves up for failure. Other young men and women felt marginalised in the masculinity hierarchy, and their experiences of oppression and a sense that their academic efforts went unnoticed and unrewarded resulted in a decision to leave school before completion of Year 12.

There were, however, exceptions. Some academically high achieving individuals with global forms of social and cultural capital still decided to leave their education because of experiences of marginalisation. Some of the most stigmatised young people with local forms of social and cultural networks also intended to continue their education despite their experiences of marginalisation within the formal and informal culture of the School.

The policy implications arising from this study include greater attention to gender practices within the School, the provision of a wider range of leisure activities in the local community and encouraging young people to become familiar with environments beyond their local area.

Introduction

In Australia and internationally, improving educational retention and completion rates for rural young people has been a key policy priority for decades. Reports on the crisis in the education system frequently dominate news headlines, and point to the controversies and tensions currently dominating the education debate:

- ‘U.S. education: Still separate and unequal (Cook in *U.S. News* 2015, U.S.)
- ‘Education system in crisis’ (Stokke in *Winnipeg Free Press* 2014, Canada)
- ‘Girls get higher grades than boys in four out of five subjects’ (*MetroXpress* 2012, Denmark)
- ‘Education Department plays down school retention figures’ (*ABC News* 2006, Australia)
- ‘Less than half of Tasmanian students finish Year 12’ (Ogilvie in *ABC News* 2013, Australia)
- ‘Tassie education system in crisis as Year 12 retention rates hit new low’ (Paine in *Mercury* 2014, Australia).

Such headlines about the crisis in the education system and trends for retention and completion rates continuing to decline reflect the emphasis placed on education in late modernity, and the need – and challenges – to develop successful policies that can contribute to reversing low rural retention and completion rates.

In Australia, the link between higher levels of educational attainment and better-quality life chances and income level, health status and participation in society has been especially important in driving the development of educational policy designed to increase educational participation. Yet the implementation of various strategies and initiatives since the 1970s has done little to improve completion of Year 12 for key target groups, particularly young people living in rural Australia. Despite an increasing emphasis on obtaining educational skills and qualifications in contemporary society, a significant group of young people remains outside full-time education and work. It is estimated that around three in ten 15-19 year-olds are not fully engaged in work, school or training (Fildes et al. 2014; Dusseldorp Skills Forum [DSF] 2005), with rural young people characterised by especially low achievement, retention and completion patterns (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA] 2012; Curtis and McMillan 2008; Creswell and Underwood 2004).

The young people in this study all had aspirations to obtain ‘a good job’ and understood the importance of education in realising their ambitions. However, embracing these ideas was not straightforward, with many consciously making the choice to leave school early. This thesis investigates the paradox that on the one hand young people have absorbed the messages of formal education policies, on the other hand a significant group of young men and women continue to make choices to leave school early.

Non-completion of school in a globalised era

The pervasiveness of negative media headlines in the public education debate is often accompanied by a focus on the abilities and efforts of the young people themselves. This emphasis on individual characteristics is embedded in a context of economic and industrial change in which the decline of traditional social structures is seen to have brought about unlimited choice and freedom. Consequently ideas such as the ‘do it yourself biography’ (Beck 1992), ‘choice biography’ (Du Bois-Reymond 1998) and ‘the project of the self’ (Giddens 1991) have become an essential part of the sociological vocabulary explaining human behaviour in post-industrial societies.

The understanding that late modernity has provided young people with unprecedented choice (Beck 1992; Giddens 1991), in combination with the prevalence of a neoliberal ideology promoting self-responsibility and self-accountability (Brown 2005; Harvey 2005), veil the continuing importance of social structures. Whilst some groups of young people have seen an expansion of their choices and opportunities in recent times, other groups of young people, including those living in rural Australia, have less opportunity to benefit from changing social and economic conditions. In contrast to the discourse on choice and freedom, there is solid evidence to suggest that young people’s educational choices are still powerfully shaped by structural forces such as class, gender and location (Corbett 2007; Marks and McMillan 2003; ACARA 2012).

Recent data from the National Report on Schooling (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs [MCEETYA] 2008: 37-38 and ACARA 2012) shows that there is a significant gap in Year 12 completion rates for males and females, between young people from low socio-economic backgrounds and those from high socio-economic backgrounds, as well as a large gap in completion rates between young people living in remote areas compared to young people in metropolitan areas. The gap between young males completing Year 12 in rural and urban areas is especially marked, with 62 per

cent of young males from urban backgrounds completing Year 12 compared with 43 per cent in remote areas. Completion figures for females follow a similar pattern, with 74 per cent of young women completing Year 12 in urban areas and 60 per cent in rural areas.

Whilst the structures of class, gender and rurality clearly present their own specific challenges to young people making their education choices in contemporary Australia, their intersection is particularly noticeable in the data above. The 19 per cent gap in Year 12 completion rates for young men, and the much larger proportion of young males and females leaving school early in rural areas compared to urban areas, speaks to the challenges facing young rural people making their educational choices. Explanations for this pattern often centre on the vulnerability of rural communities to the effects of economic restructuring (Gray and Lawrence 2001), and the barrier of distance which restricts young people's opportunities to compensate for diminishing local infrastructure by accessing resources elsewhere (Alloway and Dalley-Trim 2009; Alston 2005).

The continuing existence of a relatively large group of young people not participating in education and work reflects not only the continuing importance of structural factors on young people's educational choices but also the transformation of contemporary youth transitions (Furlong, Woodman and Wyn 2011; Geldens, Lincoln and Hodgkinson 2011). These transitions are becoming increasingly complex and tend to move in a 'yo-yo' fashion between markers of youth and adulthood rather than progressing in a linear fashion (Biggart and Walther 2005; Pais 2000; Bradley and Devadason 2008). This transformation is closely linked with the advent of globalisation as well as social and cultural changes which enable young people to assert their identity in highly individualised and creative ways (Blatterer 2007, 2010a, 2010b; Jamrozik 1998; Wyn and White 2000). However, although some young people benefit from a more individualised form of school-work transition and construct unique choices which lead to opportunities for social and economic rewards, a significant percentage of young people experiences transitions characterised by extensive periods of unemployment, underemployment, or precarious employment (Marks and McMillan 2001; Wyn and White 2004; Fildes et al. 2011).

Across Australia there is a wealth of programs and initiatives seeking to increase retention and provide young people with the skills to further their education and labour market skills in the 21st century, including the introduction of a national curriculum and standardised outcomes for students. In Tasmania there has been widespread curriculum reform,

restructuring of the post-Year 10 system and the introduction of career pathway programs. Despite the continuing development of new strategies and programs, no significant increase in post-compulsory retention and completion rates is evident in Australia or Tasmania. A significant effort in addressing the factors underpinning Australia's and Tasmania's attainment rate to Year 12 is needed if the national target to lift Year 12 completion or equivalent qualification to 90 per cent by 2015 is to be achieved (Council of Australian Governments [COAG] 2011). It is particularly important to investigate the factors underpinning the low Year 12 completion rates of some of Australia's more rural states such as Tasmania, where Year 12 completion stands at 47 per cent compared to a national rate of 73 per cent (ACARA 2012; Productivity Commission 2014). Understanding not only how structural factors impact on educational choices but also how subjective decisions to leave or stay in the education system are made is crucial for the development of policies that can successfully address the concerns and needs of young Australians making their educational choices.

An emphasis on individual responsibility dominates the policy and public discourse on school completion and youth transitions (Woodman and Wyn 2013; te Riele 2012). Together with the prevalence of a neoliberal ideology promoting self-accountability, this heightens the risk of both societal disapproval and self-blame for individuals who fail to make decisions that are deemed socially desirable (Brown 2005; Harvey 2005). The sociological emphasis on the interaction between structure and agency utilised in this thesis helps to move beyond discourses of individual responsibility to facilitate a better understanding of young rural people's choices to leave school early.

Aims and approach

This thesis aims to move beyond individualistic explanations of early school leaving in rural Australia to capture the tensions and contradictions that are often neglected in the depiction of rural life as either idyllic or disadvantaged. It especially aims to emphasise how young people subjectively negotiate their social context and construct their post-compulsory educational choices through a focus on their experiences of life in a small rural town. This focus on the experiences of young rural people has the potential to help inform policy development in the area of young people's participation in and completion of Year 12 by providing a greater link between the young people's own lives and the policies designed to help them succeed in education. The aim to illuminate young people's subjective experiences

of their education also entails giving voice to a group of young people who tend to be problematised and silenced in both policy and public discourse. Three research questions have been developed to address these aims:

1. What are the processes by which young people living in rural Australia subjectively construct their post-compulsory educational choices?
2. How are young rural people's post-compulsory educational choices shaped by their immediate social environment, in particular family, school and community?
3. How are these choices influenced by the policy environment, particularly in relation to education and the labour market?

Asking these questions with their focus on factors which the literature review identifies as critical in shaping the educational experiences and choices of young people should aid the process of gaining insights into how young people subjectively make their post-compulsory choices in a rural context.

In attempting to understand how young rural people make their educational choices this research particularly draws on Pierre Bourdieu's (1990) concept of the habitus. In developing this concept Bourdieu sets out to account for 'the internalisation of externality and the externalisation of internality' (1990: 72). This attempt to reconcile the dichotomy between objectivism and subjectivism has the potential to help shed light upon how the objective social, cultural and economic characteristics of rural communities are internalised through the habitus to create particular subjective inclinations and dispositions. Consequently Bourdieu's concept of the habitus is a useful tool in examining how these dispositions are implicated in shaping young rural people's education decisions.

The particularly high rates of early school leaving in rural areas indicate that the unique characteristics of rural communities may indeed be implicated in producing subjective dispositions that influence young people's educational decision making. In exploring the nature of these dispositions further this research also utilises Simmel's (1950 [1903]) distinction between rural and urban lifestyles. Although rather dated, the strength of Simmel's theory of the metropolis is its ability to capture the influence of changing industrial and economic conditions on human behaviour and lifestyles. His idea that the metropolis generates a specific worldview characterised by the blasé attitude which is interpreted as foreign and immoral by rural residents lends itself to an investigation of the characteristics of

a rural habitus. Using Simmel's theory to examine how perceptions of urban and rural lifestyles form part of a rural habitus has potential to provide insights into how these perceptions shape young people's educational decision making, especially as decisions to continue on to years 11 and 12 often require young people living in rural areas to relocate to urban areas. These approaches are especially synthesised through the concept of the habitus through which social forces such as rurality, class and gender intersect to create certain dispositions and inclinations.

In exploring the meanings underpinning young rural people's educational decisions this study also draws on Connell's (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity to explore masculinity as an aspect of the rural habitus. Research on the influence of masculinity on young men's experiences of schooling (Frosh et al. 2002; Mac an Ghail 1994; Walker 1988; Willis 1977) points to the importance of a tension between the characteristics of traditional forms of masculinity and the requirements of formal schooling. The notion that masculinities are always fluid and changeable (Connell 2005; Gilbert and Gilbert 1998; Swain 2006) is particularly central to the investigation of how the specific resources and opportunities available in a particular social context work to produce unique forms of masculinities.

Although early school leaving is particularly associated with young men, the link between rurality and higher rates of early school leaving for young women suggest that the concept of femininity may also be central in understanding young people's decisions to leave school early in rural Australia. The link between the expectations associated with traditional gender roles and rurality (Bryant 1999; Little 2002a, 2002b; Little and Austin 1996; Bryant and Pini 2009) may suggest that a more traditional form of femininity is associated with some young women's choices not to complete Year 12. This study draws on Connell's concepts of hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity in exploring the role of gender in choices to leave or stay at school in rural Australia.

Data was collected through 10 weeks of participant observation in a mixed gender, non-streamed rural high school, as well as semi-structured interviews with students (n=33), teachers (n=8), parents (n=8) and policy makers (n=6). The research was conducted in a small town in rural Tasmania given the fictitious name of Hillsville, and focuses on the educational experiences of six student groups: the cool boys, the wannabes, the cool girls, the quiet girls, the nerds and the ghetto people. The aggressive and competitive behaviour of the cool boys and the wannabes dominated the school environment, and the cool girls earned

status and privilege through relationships with the cool boys and wannabes. At the lower end of this hierarchy was the group of the quiet girls who resented the masculine dominance, the nerds who consisted of young men excluded from the cool boys, and wannabes and the ghetto people who were characterised by their residence in the local housing estate.

Contributions of the thesis

In exploring the topic of early school leaving in rural Australia this research addresses key limitations and gaps in the literature on Year 12 completion. One key factor driving this study is the gap in the knowledge about young rural people's subjective experiences of schooling. Although non-completion of school has been widely investigated, such investigations have traditionally focused on urban contexts and inner city schools (Connell 1982; Frosh et al. 2002; Mac an Ghaill 1996; Smyth et al. 2000, 2004; Walker 1988; Willis 1977). In the 'urban centric sociology of education' (Corbett 2010: 224) in which urban lifestyles are perceived to be the norm, investigations of rural young people's subjective experiences are often overlooked. The challenges facing rural youths in their educational decisions are clearly reflected in the statistics, yet relatively little is known about the young people's own experiences (Corbett 2007; Morris 2008; Wierenga 2009). Drawing on ethnographic research methods involving interaction with the participants in their social space, this study attempts to generate knowledge about young rural people's experiences of their education. It does so by providing a deep account of young rural people's views on life in a small rural town, and exploring how these experiences are linked with their educational choices.

This study also aims to contribute to scholarly knowledge about the post-compulsory educational choices of young people living in rural areas. Studies which focus on life in rural areas tend to conceptualise rural Australia as either relatively homogenous, idyllic or disadvantaged (Austin and Little 1996; Cuervo and Wyn 2012; Welch et al. 2007), hence ignoring the potential tensions and contradictions which may exist in rural communities and which are essential to understanding the meanings and processes underpinning the experiences of young rural people. In addition this thesis addresses a lack of knowledge about rural masculinities and femininities and their role in young people's choices to leave or stay in education. Although there is a wealth of research on the influence of masculinity on young people's experiences of schooling (Frosh et al. 2002; Mac an Ghaill 1996; Walker 1988; Willis 1977), less attention has been paid to how masculinity is experienced in a rural context (Corbett 2007; Morris 2008; Wierenga 2009). If the area of rural masculinities is an under-

researched area, rural femininities is even more so (Bryant 1999; Little 2002a, 2002b). It is essential to understanding both rural young men's and women's perceptions of gender if the high rates of non-completion of Year 12 in rural Australia are to be successfully supported. There is a specific need to understand how rurality, class and gender intersect in very particular ways to shape young people's educational decisions.

Drawing on these insights, this study aims to contribute to an understanding of how young rural people's subjectivities intersect with their social environment to influence their decision to leave the education system or commence some form of post-compulsory education in Australia. This study seeks to contribute to policies which will increase post-compulsory retention and completion in rural Australia by providing a holistic account of how young rural people make their post-compulsory educational choices. Three broad research questions have been developed to help guide this project. They focus on the processes underpinning young rural people's post-compulsory educational choices, especially the influence of their immediate social environment, education policy and the labour market.

Key arguments and findings

This thesis asks the question of how rurality influences young rural people's educational decision making. Using a combination of participant observation and in-depth interviews with Year 10 students, parents and teachers in a small rural town, as well as interviews with Australian policy makers, I examine how young people make their educational choices in one rural setting in Tasmania. Drawing on Bourdieuan concepts of social and cultural capital and the habitus, I argue that a particular culture is generated in a small town in rural Tasmania through the interaction between the unique geography of that rural area and characteristics of small town social life. In particular, I suggest the relational dynamics of gender as inflected by class and rurality are manifest in the practices of the rural habitus.

I argue that key characteristics of the rural habitus such as a strong attachment to, and relationship with, people and place and particular forms of masculinities and femininities are especially critical to the young participants' educational choices. The strength of embedded and embodied interactions with place and people influenced the young people's view of the city as a foreign and dangerous place, discouraging them from moving to larger towns to continue their education. Their relationships with gendered constructions of domination and subordination were influenced by a community emphasis on physicality through the dominance of sport and a highly physical form of hegemonic masculinity. These relationships

were linked with a pattern of decisions to leave school early. For some young men this was because of the experience of a tension between a place-based hegemonic masculinity and the cultural capital of the school. For some other young men and women, it was because they felt marginalised by the gender hierarchy operating in the informal school context. Finally, I argue that although the participants shared many aspects of the rural habitus, their experiences of rural life and educational choices were mediated by the nature of their social and cultural capital. Decisions to leave school early were generally linked to the possession of tight-knit local networks, and decisions to continue in education to globalised forms of social and cultural capital.

The key findings of this study differ from the findings of other research on education in rural settings in a number of ways. In particular the focus on young people's subjectivities provides a contrast to the large quantitative literature on young people's educational choices (Curtis and McMillan 2008; Fullarton et al. 2003; Marks and McMillan 2001). Using Bourdieu's concept of the habitus, it highlights the way in which characteristics of the rural environment become deeply embedded in the consciousness of the young people. It adds to the knowledge about the role of rurality in the lives of young people in the development of the different characteristics of the rural habitus. Findings such as the importance of embedded and embodied interactions with people and place in the construction of a distinctive rural habitus characterised by a strong attachment to and relationship with people and place help to shed light on young people's experiences of rural life. The construction of particular forms of masculinities and femininities in the context of a highly physical environment characterised by the dominance of sport and place-based social and cultural activities further illuminate the young people's experiences of rural life as being highly gendered.

In highlighting the role of rurality in young people's subjectivities this study also provides new insights into the role of rurality in early school leaving (Corbett 2007; Morris 2008; Wierenga 2009). The participants' experiences of rural life influenced their view of the city as a foreign and dangerous place and discouraged them from moving to larger towns to continue their education. In particular, the young people's daily interactions with the natural environment and their interactions with and care for wild and domestic animals generated deeply embedded and embodied experiences of rural life which they saw as incompatible with life in the city. The blurring of formal boundaries between different age groups, social background and formal hierarchies such as students and teachers in community life meant

that an experience of informality was part of the rural habitus; this was often interpreted as superior to the more formal culture of the city. Their relationships with gendered forms of domination and subordination were influenced by a highly physical form of hegemonic masculinity and also shaped decisions to leave school early. For many young men the successful performance of hegemonic masculinity, which was valued in the community, was experienced as a contrast to the requirements of formal education and resulted in decisions to withdraw from the education system before the completion of Year 12. For other young men and women marginalised in the gendered hierarchy experiences of oppression and a sense that their academic efforts went unnoticed and unrewarded were associated with decisions to leave the education system.

Decisions to leave school early were linked to the possession of tight-knit local networks, limited travel and predominantly local forms of knowledge, while decisions to continue in education were linked to the possession of globalised forms of social and cultural capital. Whilst the young people who decided to leave their education prematurely made a conscious choice, many young men associated the decision to leave school early with self-blame and a sense that they were setting themselves up for failure. Other young men and women who felt marginalised in the community and at school associated the decision to leave with both a sense of freedom and an understanding that they were missing out on important educational and career opportunities. There were also exceptions to the link between early school leaving and the possessing of tight-knit local networks. Some academically high achieving individuals with global forms of social and cultural capital still decided to leave their education because of experiences of marginalisation. In contrast, some of the most stigmatised young people with local forms of social and cultural networks also intended to continue their education despite their experiences of marginalisation within the formal and informal culture of the school because they saw education as a way out of disadvantage.

The organisation of the thesis

Chapter one explores the literature relating to school retention and completion in Australian government high schools. It highlights how social forces such as class, gender and rurality shape early school leaving in late modernity, and explores the role of current education policy in shaping patterns of success and failure at school. In this chapter I argue that the impact of these factors complicates young rural people's educational decisions because of the barrier of

distance, the young people's own understandings of place and the assumption of current educational policies that educational success is the result of individual effort.

Chapter two outlines the theoretical approach to the study. It emphasises the relevance of Bourdieu's (1990) theory of social and cultural capital and the habitus to this thesis's aim of understanding how the young people's subjective educational choices are shaped by their social context because of its emphasis on mediating between objective social structures and subjective everyday practices (Harker, Mahar and Wilkes 1990). It also highlights how a combination of Bourdieu's theory, Simmel's (1950) ideas on the differences between rural and urban lifestyles and Connell's (2005) theory of hegemonic masculinity help illuminate the role of the rural and gendered aspects of the habitus in young rural people's decisions to leave school early.

The third chapter outlines the thesis's methodological approach. It highlights how the methodology attempts to address an imbalance between quantitative and qualitative educational research, and outlines the need to implement a methodology that is able to capture the subjectivities of the young participants. It particularly focuses on the relevance of participant observation to this objective.

Chapter four explores Hillsville's social and economic structure to highlight how its history and social and geographic characteristics shape the lives of its young people. In this chapter I argue that Hillsville is a divided community. On the one hand it is a traditional rural community characterised by a high level of social cohesion and a strong presence of the primary industries. On the other hand the impact of globalisation and economic restructuring has weakened the local labour market, reduced opportunities for secure and permanent employment, and produced new fault lines.

Chapter five begins the data analysis. It describes the young people's subjective experiences of their lives in Hillsville in order to capture their worldview and its relationship with educational decision making. In this chapter I argue that the young participants' experiences of life in a small rural town reflect the importance of a rural habitus with distinctive characteristics shaped by the intersection of class, gender and rurality to their sense of self. However, whilst the young people shared many aspects of the rural habitus, their experiences of rural life differed according to their relationships with local forms of masculinities and femininities. Sport played a key role in the construction of place based forms of masculinities and femininities in Hillsville. The centrality of sport as the only formal leisure activity in the

social and cultural life of the town meant that highly masculine performances on the sports field became a source of celebration and embedded in the cultural capital of the town. In turn young people who did not conform to the practices associated with this form of masculinity or who did not enjoy involvement in sport were constructed as outsiders. The nature of the young people's social and cultural capital also shaped the participants' experiences of rural life. Young people with tight-knit local networks and predominantly local forms of knowledge tended to view life outside Hillsville as foreign and unsafe whilst young people who possessed globalised forms of social and cultural capital felt at home both in the country and the city.

Chapter six examines the dynamics operating in the informal school culture at Hillsville High. I argue that key characteristics of the rural habitus that influenced the young people's experiences of rural life also shaped their educational experiences. Their experiences were particularly influenced by the carry-over of the hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005) that dominated community life into the school culture. The presence of a particular form of masculinity in the informal school culture dominated the student hierarchy and created relationships of superiority and inferiority between the six student groups.

Chapter seven sheds more light upon the dynamics operating in the informal school culture by investigating the young people's subjective experiences of their education. In this chapter I argue that the dominance of a highly physical practices in the informal school culture was not experienced as uncomplicated by the young participants. For many young men engagement in anti-intellectual and anti-authoritarian behaviours co-existed with a desire to engage with the formal curriculum, and other young people's experiences of domination led to disengagement with their academic studies.

Chapter eight highlights the experiences of and views on rural education of teachers, parents and policy makers. I argue that the dominance of hegemonic masculinity in the construction of social relations in Hillsville also impacted on teachers' and parents' relationships with the school. The experiences of feeling powerless in the education system which these two groups shared were linked to difficulties in addressing patterns of domination and subordination in the informal school culture because these dynamics were largely unrecognised. I further argue that a contrast between the claim of policy makers that teachers are expected to interpret the curriculum and make it relevant for various social groups, and the difficulties of

teachers in addressing the power dynamics at Hillsville High suggests a need to raise teachers' awareness of rural community dynamics.

Chapter nine explores the factors and processes underpinning the young participants' choices to leave school early or continue on the Years 11 and 12. I argue that the young people's experiences of education are linked with their educational decisions. Many young men decided to exit the education system because of a tension between their adherence to a place based form of masculinity and the requirements of education, and other young men and women left school early because of experiences of marginalisation. However, I further argue that these decisions were not experienced as unproblematic, with many young men leaving their education with a sense of failure. Other young men and women left school feeling relieved to escape what they had experienced as oppression and marginalisation while at the same time feeling anxious about their choice not to continue in education because of their understanding of the need for educational credentials in the knowledge economy.

The conclusion sums up the research by highlighting how aspects of the rural habitus such as a deeply embedded sense of place and valorisation of a particular form of hegemonic masculinity were experienced as positive and meaningful for many of the young people; yet these aspects also worked against the aspirations of many young men and women to continue their education. In this chapter I also compare the policy analysis and key insights from policy makers to the young people's experiences and identifies some policy implications.

Chapter 1: Literature review

Introduction

This literature review explores the literature relating to school retention and completion in Australian government high schools and focuses on six main areas: contemporary youth experiences and the labour market, education policy research on school retention, education research on school engagement, the role of teachers in young people's decision making, the contemporary education policy environment, and an analysis of key Australian and Tasmanian policies directed at improving retention and completion rates to Year 12. Special attention is paid to young people living in rural areas throughout the review.

The literature review reveals that the social, cultural and economic processes associated with globalisation have transformed contemporary youth experiences of education and work. This has provided young people with opportunities to make highly individualised and original educational and occupational choices. Yet making successful choices involves navigating the particular challenges and risks specific to late modernity. Young people who are excluded from the opportunity to engage with post-compulsory educational activity often miss out on significant personal, social and economic benefits (Maguire and Rennison 2005: 199; FYO 2013).

Young people living in rural Australia constitute one group which is particularly vulnerable to exclusion from participation in the new economy. This is due to the barrier of distance which limits their access to education and employment opportunities (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission [HREOC] 1999). The transformation of the labour market through the event of globalisation has increased the emphasis on obtaining educational skills and qualifications, further exacerbated the risk of exclusion from secure and permanent employment for young rural people (Alloway et al. 2004: 208; Kenyon et al. 2001). In the literature review I argue that young rural Australians face barriers and risks that are unfamiliar to other groups of young people negotiating their educational choices. The barrier of distance and the young people's own understandings of place especially work to complicate their post-compulsory educational decisions. I also highlight how an emphasis on self-responsibility in current educational policy increases the risk of young people

internalising their failure to make the transition from school to some form of post-compulsory education rather than recognising the impact of structural forces on their decisions.

The globalisation of the labour market and contemporary youth experiences

Wyn and White (1997: 11) refer to youth as ‘the social processes whereby age is socially constructed, institutionalized and controlled in historically and culturally specific ways’. From this perspective, youth is a social construction. Sociologists argue that dominant representations of youth operate in part to differentiate adolescence as a specific age stage from childhood on one hand, and adulthood on the other (Roche and Tucker 1997: 4). While adolescence is a physiological developmental phase, youth is also a social category framed by particular social institutions (Wyn and White 2004). For example, youth is institutionalised in the education system as leading to the status of adulthood. This deficit approach constructs young people as a marginalised group whose participation in decision making and choices must be controlled due to their presumed immaturity (Mizen 2004). In contrast the approach taken in this study complicates this deficit approach by arguing that young people’s knowledges and understandings are constructed in relation to their social context. Such knowledges and understandings cannot merely be seen as reflecting an immature mindset, but rather is a form of capital that might be positive in some contexts and negative in others.

Most major organisations define youth as those aged 15-24 years, including the Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] (2005) and the International Labour Organisation [ILO].

Traditional markers of the transition from youth to adulthood include completing school, leaving home, beginning a career and marrying (Shanahan et al. 2005: 225; te Riele 2004: 244). However, the linear pathway implicit in these indicators has become blurred in Western societies as education has extended into adulthood and family formation postponed (Wierenga 2002; Raffe 2001; 2003; Wyn and White 2004).

The blurring of traditional markers of adulthood is intimately connected to a changing labour market context. The transformation from a manufacturing to a service economy has been linked to the decline in secure permanent and full-time jobs in the youth labour market and a corresponding rise in low-skilled and paid part-time and casual work (Jamrozic 1998; Mills and Blosfeld 2003). These developments have been accompanied by the expansion of education as a result of the rise in credentialism and greater need for skills and qualifications in the new competitive economy (Vickers 2013; Wyn and White 2004). The negative effects of globalisation are especially acute in rural communities where the decline in small business

severely affects young people's employment opportunities (Alston 2005; Gray and Lawrence 2001; Epps and Soerensen 1996: 156).

While an increased level of education is strongly linked with increased income and more secure jobs in the service economy (Brooks 2009; Furlong and Cartmel 2009; Lamb et al. 2000), this link can be obscure for many young people (Dwyer and Wyn 2001). It is often assumed that the school–work transition is ‘a predictable end-point defined in terms of arrival at or achievement of adult status’ (Looker and Dwyer 1997: 5), but empirical research clearly suggests that there is no simple and clear arrival at adulthood. For young people in the new economy, employment is not necessarily guaranteed; jobs are likely to be casualised and part-time; unemployment is disproportionately high; apprenticeships and job training are difficult to obtain; many students commence part-time work before they leave their education and many young people move away from their parents only to return after a relationship breakup, loss of job or in between semesters (Raffe 2001; te Riele 2004; Andres and Wyn 2010). Du Bois-Reymond (1998) suggests that in a changing economic and social context, transitions and status passages are no longer linear but circular in nature and characterised by synchronicity and reversibility of events. Dwyer and Wyn (2001) argue that this blurring of traditional markers of adulthood means that some young people are essentially denied the status of adulthood.

The globalised labour market in which young people are making their lives is often associated with the emergence of the ideology of neoliberalism. According to Harvey (2005: 2) this dominant ideology is best defined as:

...in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that propose that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade. The role of the state is to preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices.

With this definition Harvey defines neoliberalism as a distinctive economic theory which in recent times has replaced more Keynesian approaches to the economy. In highlighting the liberating quality of the economy for human potential Harvey connects with the idea that in the current changing economic climate choice is increasingly seen as an expression of personal agency and responsibility. Brown (2005) comments on this extension of economic rationality to formerly non-economic domains and institutions in her critique of

neoliberalism. She contends that neoliberalism ‘figures individuals as rational, calculating creatures whose moral autonomy is measured by their capacity for “self-care” – the ability to provide for their own needs and service their own ambitions’. She further argues that this construction of the rationally calculating individual ‘carries the responsibility for the self to new heights’ no matter what constraints the individual experiences. In turn a ‘mismanaged life’ becomes a sign of individual failure.

The consequences of this transformation of the economy and work are far-reaching and extend into domains such as social life and family life. Andres and Wyn (2010: 128) describe how ‘the rules of the game of work as experienced by previous generations – long-term employment and related relationships and connections, and systems for promotion have been reduced or eliminated and have been replaced with weak and transient forms of association’. Consequently many young people in contemporary society are learning to negotiate a radically different set of rules than their parents, and without suitable guidance and support the risk of a ‘mismanaged life’ and experiences of failure is high. The discourse on individual responsibility provides a stark contrast to the evidence that social positioning continues to shape young people’s experiences of educational and occupational success and failure (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA] 2012; Fullarton, Ainley and Hillman 2003; Marks and McMillan 2001, 2003).

Late modernity, risk and educational qualifications

In a detraditionalised and individualised world individuals are required to write their own biographies (Giddens 1991; Beck 1992). Analysing young people’s post-school experiences, Furlong and Cartmel (1997: 1) argue that contemporary youth enter a risk society where they have to ‘negotiate a set of risks which were largely unknown to their parents’. In contrast to the previous generation, contemporary youth have to construct their aspirations and expectations about the future within constantly changing paradigms. This position is supported by Abbott-Chapman (2001: 22) who argues that contemporary life confronts young people ‘...with uncharted pathways into an increasingly unknowable future’. Whilst these ‘uncharted pathways’ tend to create more choice for young people with higher levels of education, they also create specific risks for early school leavers who are over-represented in rural areas.

Although some early school leavers do obtain secure manual jobs (Lamb, Dwyer and Wyn 2000: 48), Australian and international research continually link lower levels of education to

labour market disadvantage and marginalisation through such factors as unemployment, underemployment, low labour force participation, and part-time and casual work with lesser conditions or pay (Cuervo and Wyn 2012; Helme and Polesel 2004; Carcillo et al. 2015). Access to employment is further complicated for young people as youth unemployment is three times that of adults (Wyn and White 2013), demonstrating how early school leavers are amongst the most marginalised individuals on the youth labour market.

Youth unemployment tends to be higher in rural areas, and Tasmania has been identified as having the highest youth unemployment of all states and territories (Brotherhood of St Laurence 2014). This is linked with Tasmania's rural and low socio-economic status, with one body of research (James et al. 1999; Abbott-Chapman 2001; Abbott-Chapman and Kilpatrick 2001) highlighting that rural early school leavers from low socio-economic backgrounds form 'the most disadvantaged labour market group' (James et al. 1999: 5). Youth employment rates also vary significantly by gender, with young women experiencing higher rates of not participating in the labour market and part-time work than young males. Both Helme and Polesel (2004) and Lamb and Mason (2008) found that female early school leavers were almost three times more likely to be working in part-time or casual work than males, who were more likely to be engaged in apprenticeships and to be working full-time. In these studies young women were also far more likely to be unemployed or outside the labour market than young males.

A significant group of young people also remains outside full-time education and work. Data from the Foundation for Young Australians [FYA] (2013) show that almost 57 per cent of 15–24 year-olds who completed Year 10 or below are not fully engaged in the year after leaving school (FYA 2013: 21). Within this group, young women are more likely 'to be not fully engaged in employment, education or training (28 per cent of 23 year-olds) than young men (17 per cent of 23 year-olds)'. Qualitative findings from the Life Patterns Study confirm the importance of gender as an important determinant of labour market disadvantage in the lives of young women (Cuervo and Wyn 2011). However, this study included young married women with university degrees in the most likely groups to drop out of the labour market because of the competing demands of work and domestic responsibilities. This connects with research on young people's post-school outcomes and the continuing income gap between men and women throughout the life course (Cuervo, Wyn and Crofts 2012; Eckersley 2005; Esping-Andersen 2009; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 2008). This body

of research clearly suggests that gender remains a key factor in shaping young people's labour market experiences in post-industrial societies.

Early school leaving in late modernity is associated with significant disadvantage, as young people enter a highly competitive and casualised labour market without the skills and qualifications necessary to succeed in it. This exclusion from education and the labour market is also associated with a series of other risks. Polk and White (1999) and Lochner and Moretti (2004) argue that the decline of traditional pathways from school to work has increased the engagement of some young people, especially young males, in marginal activities. The association between early school leaving and engagement in marginal activities is especially acute in rural areas (Marks and McMillan 2001: 54; Sweet 1998: 6). The lack of access to education, employment and leisure is associated with higher rates of substance use amongst rural youth (HREOC 1999; Wyn, Stokes and Stafford 1998; White 1999), higher pregnancy rates for young rural women and higher suicide rates for young rural men (Bourke 2003; Graham 1994: 409).

Non-completion of school has also been linked with ill-health through its association with unemployment, underemployment and a lack of economic and social capital through exclusion from social networks that can improve access to information and services (Conti et al. 2010; FYA 2010). The high rates of non-completion of school and unemployment provide fewer opportunities for rural Australians to maintain good health. This is, for example, reflected in self-assessments of health: 13.3 per cent of people living in remote areas assess their health as poor compared to 10 per cent in metropolitan areas, and there is a much higher avoidable mortality rate in rural and remote areas compared to the major cities (National Rural Health Alliance 2012).

The Australian education system and school retention

Australia has a tripartite education system comprised of government schools, Catholic schools and independent (non-government) schools. In Tasmania the government sector consists of primary schools (Kindergarten to Year 6), high schools (years 7 to 10), and senior secondary colleges (years 11 and 12). There are a number of district high schools across the state that cater for Kindergarten to Year 10; some isolated high schools offer a limited range of senior secondary courses. As in most other Australian states and territories, it is

compulsory to attend school until age 17 in Tasmania (Department of Education and Training 2014).¹

Completion of Year 10 in Australia has been nearly 100 per cent since 1988 (Collins, Kenway and McLeod 2000: 32). Retention to Year 12 has been relatively stable at around 75 per cent since the 1990s (Vickers 2013), with a national apparent retention rate of 81.6 to Year 12 in 2013 (ABS 2013f). In 2012 the national completion rate for Year 12 was 76 per cent, yet this rate varies significantly between states and territories, from a high of 82 per cent in the Australian Capital Territory to a low of 38 per cent in the Northern Territory and 47 per cent in Tasmania (ACARA 2012). Australia's early leaving rate for Year 12 is also high at 14.7 per cent compared to 12.9 per cent for the OECD and 11 per cent for the European Union (FYA 2013: 5 and 22).

The key variables influencing completion of Year 12 are gender, socio-economic status, geographic location, ethnicity, school sector and achievement (Fullarton, Ainley and Hillman 2003; Marks and McMillan 2001). According to the most recent data from ACARA (2012: 37-38) in Australia Year 12 is completed by 78 per cent of females compared to 69 per cent of males. This report also highlights that 67 per cent of young people from low socio-economic backgrounds completed Year 12 in 2012 compared to 80 per cent for high socio-economic status groups. The gap in completion rates is especially marked between rural and urban areas, with 55 per cent of young people from remote zones compared to 76 per cent of young people in metropolitan zones completing year 12. Rural young men are the most likely group to leave school early, with 50 per cent of this group completing year 12 compared to 72 per cent of urban young men. However, the gap between rural young women and their urban counterparts is also significant, with 61 per cent of rural young women completing year 12 compared to 79 per cent of urban young women. Furthermore, Fullarton, Ainley and Hillman (2003) found that previous school achievement was associated with a 31 per cent difference between the highest and the lowest of four groups categorised in order of achievement. Most reports analysing the effects of school sector on educational achievements conclude that students from the non-government school sector have higher retention and completion rates

¹ In Australia Year 12 is the final year of high school. However, schooling is only compulsory until age 17, and some people legally leave school before completion of Year 12.

as well as more successful academic outcomes (Lamb, Rumberger, Jesson and Teese 2004; Marks 2004).

These patterns of retention and completion have become associated with the ‘what about the boys’ debate (Francis 2006; Hayes and Linaard 2003; Martino and Meyeen 2001). The higher retention and completion rates of young women compared to young men, as well as their advancements on the labour market, has meant that young women have come to be seen as the main beneficiaries of the high level of individualisation and choice that characterise late modernity (Baker 2010; Hayes and Linaard 2003). This discourse is underpinned by the idea that the goals of the feminist agenda have encouraged young women to achieve at the expense of men, especially through educational reforms that favour young women (Yates 1997). However, Morris (2012b: 1) argues that boys’ underachievement reflects ‘a hidden cost of the power associated with masculinity’ rather than reversed gender inequalities in schools. Echoing Morris’ thoughts Ringrose (2007: 484) uses the concept of ‘the successful girl’ to denote how girls have become the new poster boy for neoliberal dreams of winning, and ‘just doing it’ against the odds’, but she also outlines how this understanding masks continuing gender inequalities. According to Linaard, Mills and Weaver-Hightower (2012: 407), the discourse on underachieving boys forms part of a recuperative masculinity politics that rejects a move towards a more equal gender order and aims to ‘recoup the patriarchal gender order and institutional gender regimes’; it does this by essentialising gender through categorising boys and girls into stereotypical forms of masculinity and femininity. This essentialist approach ignores a variety of factors such as women’s lifetime labour force participation being lower than males despite their advances in education and on the labour market (King 1999; Pocock 2003) and exceptions to normative constructions of gender (Morris 2011). Baker (2010) furthermore argues that young women have become seen as a metaphor for the progress of society and that expectations of successful educational and occupational outcomes places them under exceptional pressure to perform and is accompanied by new burdens and anxieties. This gender politics significantly hinders the development of successful education policies aimed at increasing completion rates because its biologically deterministic focus obscures the real needs of young men and women, especially marginalised or disadvantaged groups (Linaard, Mills and Weaver-Hightower 2012). These needs are reflected in the retention statistics outlined above which show greater differences according to class and location than gender.

Young people's subjective aspirations and choices

Whilst the evidence above canvases some of the broader influences that shape young people's educational decision making in rural areas, an understanding of the young people's own experiences is essential if processes of social exclusion arising from different education outcomes are to be reversed (Alston and Kent 2009; Alloway and Dalley-Trim 2009). Despite the high numbers of young people continuing to leave school as soon as legally possible, research indicates that young people's own educational and occupational aspirations tend to be ambitious and influenced by various factors. In their study of how young people make their career decisions Alloway et al. (2004) conclude that the participants in their study had high ambitions for their careers, and had invested time and thought into developing their future plans no matter what particular career path they had chosen. Mendick and Allen (2012) draw attention to the persistent influence of 'the social function of celebrity' (Turner 2010) on young people's aspirations. In their study Mendick and Allen found that many young people's ambitions were to be famous, such as a young girl who wanted to '...be like known in ... the dance industry'. In a rural context one study found adolescents living in rural communities to have significantly lower aspirations than adolescents from urban areas (Ruth 2002), but other research has found that rural students have high ambitions and aspirations, although they are acutely aware of the obstacles confronting them such as the barrier of distance (Alloway and Dalley-Trim 2009; Bourke 1997). The inconsistency in the research about young rural people's aspirations may point to the enormous diversity between rural communities and the differing effect of globalisation that operates between and within rural settings.

In contrast to the high aspirations young people have about their futures, the reasons they give for actually leaving school early are dominated by the desire to work and a lack of interest in school (Teese 2002; Smyth et al. 2000, 2004; Trent and Slade 2001). Findings from the Longitudinal Studies of Australian Youth show that most early school leavers give work related reasons for leaving school (Penman 2004: 25), whilst the qualitative Early School Leavers project in the 1990s found that the early school leavers often felt that 'anything is better than school' (Dwyer and Wyn 2001: 47). Rural early school leavers report that distance to college, financial barriers, and attachment to place (HREOC 1999; Penman 2004; Wierenga 2009) are implicated in their decision to leave school early. Taken together, these findings suggest that young people will not stay at school if they do not feel at ease there or if they are disengaged.

The discrepancy between some young people's educational aspirations and their actual choices is also shaped by a lack of ability to realise these aspirations. Reay (2001; Reay et al. 2008), in her research on working class youth and education, found that young people's career decisions were not always supported by resources. Her findings especially reveal how working class subjectivities are often associated with alienation in a predominantly middle class education system. In an Australian context these findings are mirrored in the findings of Connell et al. (1982) and Ashenden et al (1985) on the experiences of working class students and their families of the education system as an oppressive and dominant system. More recent Australian research on young people's educational aspirations and choices include Thomson's (2002) research on the interaction between local geography and neighbourhoods and the influence of neoliberal policies on young people's experiences of education. Thomson particularly argues that the increasing introduction of narrow educational outcomes into the curriculum rather than a more holistic approach to schooling has exacerbated the incongruence between the knowledges that working class students acquire at home and the mandated school curriculum.

Qualitative studies examining young people's educational aspirations and choices in a rural context are sparse (Bryant and Pini 2009; Corbett 2007; Morris 2008; Wierenga 2009). Corbett's (2007) study of young people in a small Canadian coastal community provides one account of young rural people's educational aspirations and experiences. Through his extensive fieldwork and interviews with young people, parents and teachers Corbett captures the complexity of young rural people's school-work transitions. He describes how the stories of his participants are underpinned by ambivalence: pride in and sense of belonging to their community, and a longing for education and work opportunities they cannot achieve if they choose to stay in their local area. Corbett (2007) particularly links the young people's ambivalent feelings to a contrast between the school's expectation to them to continue their education away from home and their own embodied experiences of belonging to their community. He furthermore argues that the 'disembedding' institution of education with its 'standardised accountability schemes and centralised curricula' that contain no room for place based experiences constructs young people who do not want to leave their communities as educational failures (Corbett 2009: 4), thus contributing to their ambivalent feelings about life in a rural area.

Corbett (2013) in a follow up study to his 2007 research suggests that the dominance of neoliberal discourse in Western countries has ensured that early school leaving is seen as a

personal choice. However, he suggest that his participants' educational choices are embedded in family resources and networks of cultural, social and economic capital (2007a and b, 2009, 2013), and points to 'an uneven distribution of mobility opportunities and the extended family-supported moratorium where a young adult is allowed to explore educational and occupational landscapes beyond what can be seen locally' (Corbett 2013: 275). Corbett here alludes to the importance for young rural people to develop a form of 'mobility capital' (Corbett 2007: 257), but also to the influence of class in facilitating this development. Only young people from families with resources and time required to grow the social and cultural capital that underpins the 'mobility capital' will be able to undertake the complex symbolic work that characterises the post-industrial economy. Corbett further argues that his participants in the follow up study, where the fishing industry had undergone additional economic restructuring, had become aware of the need to develop a form of 'mobility capital' to a greater extent than the participants in the 2007 study. The participants in the follow up study expressed an increased concern with 'both their ability to get out and what they would find "out there"' (Corbett 2013: 278). For these young people the pride associated with staying close to home and surviving turbulent economic conditions had been replaced by a sense of risk.

In an Australian context Wierenga (2009), in her longitudinal study of young people in the small rural Tasmanian community of Myrtle Vale, provides detailed descriptions of how the choices of her young participants are closely bound up with the particular resources they have access to. She highlights (2009: 77) how the young people's choices fall into the four broad categories of 'retreating', those individuals who look forward to leaving school but have no particular plans; 'exploring', those whose aspirations are 'specific but abstract'; 'wandering', those whose ideas are often glamorised but ungrounded and 'settling', those whose futures are grounded in the local area. Wierenga (2009: 74) points out that at the end of year 10 the young people are negotiating not only the school-work transition but also 'other significant life changes such as having friends leave town, the emergence of partners, moving out of home, or families moving out of town'. Wierenga (2009: 60-62) describes in-depth how these negotiations are influenced by 'allies' who coach the young people in their decision making, and highlights how broader family networks are linked to broader worldviews, whereas local and more homogenous worldviews are linked to a perception that education is irrelevant and choices to leave school early.

The tension between some young people's high aspirations to themselves and a lack of broader economic, social and cultural resources to help them realise those aspirations draws attention to the importance of engaging students in learning rather than narrowly focusing on student outcomes. In examining how to improve student engagement Willms (2003) studied the relative influence of family-related risk factors and individual schools' educational policy across OECD countries and concluded that individual schools' educational policy can meaningfully improve student engagement. Willms' findings are concurrent with Taylor and Nelms' (2006) conclusion that school engagement in Australia is influenced by family background, but individual schools and policy makers can work to increase the engagement of young people in disadvantaged circumstances. Taylor and Nelms suggest promoting a climate of inclusion and providing non-academic career options and flexible pathways back into education for early school leavers; they note that these options may contribute to an improvement in educational engagement. Individual teachers are also identified as one of the key factors influencing student engagement and achievement (Lingaard, Mills and Hayes 2000; Rowe and Rowe 2000; Beutel 2010), and central to the implementation of policies addressing young people's engagement with schooling. According to this body of research, one significant way to improve retention is successful learning achieved through a strong attachment to schools through their teachers.

Young people's educational choices and the importance of teachers

The potential of teachers to help foster a sense of belonging in the school environment is illustrated in the definition of the teaching profession as 'not merely a cognitive or technical procedure but a complex personal, social, often elusive set of embedded processes and practices that concern the whole person' (Burton and Johnson 2010). The encouraging effect teachers can have on student achievement is, for example, demonstrated by Dziubinski (2014) whose qualitative and quantitative work with 16 college students revealed that positive student-teacher relationships led to inclusive learning communities that helped students succeed in their A-levels. In general the literature on the effect of teachers on student performance concludes that supportive classroom environments facilitate high quality learning experiences and that classroom management is amongst the most important factors influencing student learning (Adalsteindottir 2004; Romi et al. 2009; Lingaard et al. 2000; 2002).

The expectation that teachers can foster environments that encourage a sense of belonging and achievement is contradicted by high attrition rates amongst first-year teachers themselves (Department of Education, Science and Training [DEST] 2003; Hicks 2003; Mackenzie 2007; Smyth 2001). In a study of Department of Education schools in New South Wales, Mackenzie (2007) found that teacher morale is at an all-time low in Australia. Mackenzie suggests that this situation is linked to: ineffective leadership; high workloads, low status; low salary; negative media coverage; student welfare and behavioural issues, with teachers increasingly being asked to take on tasks previously performed by social workers. In her analysis of educational infrastructure in late modernity Brennan (2006) attributes the increased workloads placed on teachers to the neoliberal climate that characterises contemporary society and the cost-cutting and downsizing activities that accompany it. Other studies have found that difficulties in maintaining a supportive and inclusive classroom is one of the most frequently reported factors in low morale amongst teachers (Hudson 2009; Putman 2009). Together these studies suggest that the current economic climate puts pressure on schools and teachers in ways which impair their ability to support their students.

Low teacher attrition rates are especially marked in rural Australia (Boylan and McSwann 1998; Brennan 2006; 2009). Brennan (2009) suggests that the isolated location of rural schools, which increases the cost to access resources and support, contributes to the high rural teacher attrition. Research on teacher experiences in rural areas also indicate that teachers, like their students, may withdraw from the education system because of feelings of not fitting in. Studies in this area suggest that teachers who themselves grow up in rural areas tend to become permanent rural teachers, whilst teachers from other backgrounds experience a greater struggle to fit in with the culture, practices and belief systems of rural communities (Boylan 1998; Burton and Johnson 2010). These findings shed light upon the reasons for the high turnover of teachers in rural schools which may influence the extent to which students feels a sense of belonging to the school community, potentially contributing to choices to leave school early.

The subjective beliefs of teachers are also implicated in students' decisions to leave or stay at school. Youdell (2006) explores 'whether thinking in terms of discourse and performative constitutions can help to understand student subjectivities, students and learners, processes of inclusion and exclusion, and the interactions across these' (p. 56). She argues that dominant discourses related to class, race and sexuality influence how young people are constructed as

appropriate learners or non-learners in schools and highlights how student identities are constructed in the intersection of students, teachers and the institutional discourses of schools.

Youdell argues that the micro exclusions that take place in trivial, everyday events inside schools cannot be understood as simply being experienced by students, but 'rather these must be understood as constitutive of the student, constitutions whose cumulative effects coagulate to limit 'who' a student can be, or even if s/he can be a student at all' (pp. 12-13). Youdell further proposes that identity categories become meaningful through their relationships with other categories within particular constellations. Through these constellations students are constituted through 'dichotomies of good/bad students and acceptable/unacceptable and even ideal/impossible learners' (p. 30). It is through these constitutions that some young people become included in schooling and others excluded.

Expanding on how particular constellations restrain some behaviours and make others possible Youdell argues that '...the discourses through which constellations of identity markers are constituted might make it all but impossible for some students to attain sub-cultural status within the student milieu, while the sub-cultural status of other students is all but guaranteed. And, in reverse, it might be all but impossible for some students to be recognised, or recognisable, as learners in schools' (p. 96). Youdell highlights that these constellations are not fixed but shifting and non-necessary (p. 30; 103). In addition, she suggests that 'unacceptable learners' also 'resist such constitutions and ... deploy discourse to constitute themselves again differently. That is, students have been shown to act with discursive agency and deploy performative politics' (p. 173).

The example of Steve shows how different identity categories come into play to exclude him from the educational process through the 'simultaneous constitution of him as (hyper-)adult-masculine, a bad student, and an unacceptable, or even impossible learner' (p. 103). This construction of Steve as a 'bad student' takes place against the school's perception of a learner as a child, passive, and, perhaps, feminine. Youdell shows how the constitution of students as good or bad learners is struggled over through the day-to-day and moment-moment practices of students and teachers. For example, a vignette demonstrates how a teacher's assumption that one young man, Steve, is on referral and Steve's own acknowledgement of this confirms a constitution of Steve as a bad student. The teacher's second assumption that Steve is already being monitored by the School by being required to carry a report card on which teachers record his behaviour further confirms this construction.

Steve's claim that he does not have his report card consolidates the construction of Steve as a 'bad student' (p. 103-104).

However, Steve's own practices are also implicated in constituting him as a 'bad student'. As he is escorted out of the classroom Steve expresses his contempt for the School's authority through his bodily practices. The way he moves to make 'his chair scrape along the floor' which makes 'the table move slightly forward' (p. 103) as well as his slow, striding walk out of the classroom form part of the way Steve constitutes himself as a 'bad student'. Youdell highlights in her analyses how Steve's bodily actions 'cite the bodily dispositions of entitled, confident, anti-authoritarian, adult, masculinity – man – and are citations and inscriptions of Steve's sub-cultural status within the student milieu' (p. 104). Steve's actions of leaving the desk and the classroom in a particular way constitute him simultaneously as a bad student and an adult, masculine man (105). Using the example of Steve Youdell demonstrates how identity categories are repeatedly inscribed in the moment to moment encounters between students and teachers to construct particular subjects. Youdell's analysis and emphasis on discourse and performative constitutions contribute to an understanding of the processes and factors implicated in choices to complete Year 12 or leave school early, especially how these choices are actively shaped by both students and teachers.

Education policy, neoliberalism, and the construction of the self-responsible citizen

Australian policy responses to increasing retention and completion are embedded in the view that education constitutes a key way to improve structural problems in the economy through the development of human capital. This view emerged in the 1980s when Western societies were being transformed from industrial to post-industrial economies. These policies responded to concerns about the need for economies to be competitive in a changing global economic labour market characterised by the production of knowledge and information (Woodman and Wyn 2013). In this globalised and uncertain labour market, neoliberal policy approaches linked educational attainment with personal and societal economic prosperity, underpinned by the understanding that more highly skilled people were needed in the contemporary knowledge based economy (Ball 1998; Down 2009; te Riele 2012). Thus, the neoliberal policies enacted during the 1980s and 1990s reflected a need to create new kinds of human capital to support the transformation of the economy through wider educational participation and attainment in the secondary education system.

The belief that investment in individuals' education is the key to overcome economic challenges continues to underpin current approaches to education policy (Olsen, Codd and O'Neill 2004). Australian approaches to education policy are to a high degree influenced by the trends set by international policy organisations such as the Organisation for Economic Development and Co-operation [OECD] and the World Bank (Henry et al. 2001). Although the OECD is basically concerned with economic policy, education has acquired an increased importance within the organisation, as it has been linked to national economic competitiveness and sustained economic growth in the knowledge economy. This is reflected in the OECD's key documents, which note that 'Both individuals and countries benefit from education. For individuals, the potential benefits lie in general quality of life and in the economic returns of sustained, satisfying employment. For countries, the potential benefits lie in economic growth and the development of shared values that underpin social cohesion' (OECD 2010: 1). This point of view is also advocated by other international organisations such as the World Bank (2014) which in its broadest policy statement emphasises 'education as a powerful driver of development' and the demands of the labour market which requires more 'skilled and agile workers than ever before'. These key statements indicate that an economic imperative continues to underpin contemporary education policy, but also point to a tension between this imperative and a more liberal democratic discourse emphasising that the key function of education is to assist individuals in reaching their full potential (Codd et al. 2002).

Woodman and Wyn (2013) link the continuing influence of an economic imperative in education to the emergence of neoliberal policies and a greater emphasis on the constitution of the self as a project of self-realisation. They argue that a historic shift from Keynesian to monetarist policies in the 1980s and 1990s underpin this development. Whilst Keynesian policies were based on the assumption that governments have some responsibility for society, the monetarist policies in the 1980s depended on neoliberal discourses of individualism, self-realisation and self-responsibility. All this was assumed to be realised through the free market and its emphasis on people's rights to make free and rational choices in order to transform and improve themselves. Olsen, Codd and O'Neill (2004) further make the point that while classical liberalism promises individual freedom from state controls, neoliberal impulses favour state powers that actively shape the kinds of individuals who will help to optimise the economy.

These thoughts on the transformation of the economy and society are reminiscent of the ideas of Du gay (1991: 46) who has spoken about ‘the “market penetration” of enterprise culture into all areas of social and cultural life’ to cultivate enterprising subjects - autonomous, self-regulating and productive individuals who take responsibility for their own future through their own efforts’. This penetration of enterprise culture into the domain of education has generated arguments that human capital policies commodify young people and turn schools into places that add capital value to youth. This minimises the role of schools as places where individuals can grow and develop their own skills and talents, which will contribute to the economy in unique ways (Olsen, Codd and O’Neill 2004; Woodman and Wyn 2013).

A body of literature has explored how neoliberal ideas have shaped the lives of young people. In this area of research considerable attention has been paid to education because of its role in preparing young people for their participation in the knowledge economy. Recent studies in this area (Ball, Maguire and Macrae 2000; Andres and Wyn 2010; Nairn, Higgins and Sligo 2012) focus on how the post 1970s generation manage changed social and economic conditions such as economic uncertainty. *Children of Rogernomics* (2012) by Nairn, Higgins and Sligo is perhaps the work that most intensely focuses on the impact of neoliberal policies on the lives of young people. It explores the identities of young people in New Zealand who have grown up since 1984 and how these identities have been shaped by the messages of neoliberal policies that people are self-interested and rational. They investigate this through multiple interviews with the young people as well as through the participants’ construction of an ‘anti-CV’ which includes photographs, music, video and art. Using this approach the authors explore ‘what the young people’s evolving identities reveal about the social context in which they were forged’ (171) with a focus on how neoliberal policy reforms intersect with class, gender and ethnicity.

One of the key findings of *Children of Rogernomics* relates to the young participants’ belief that engagement with education guarantees careers and employment. The authors argue that the young people’s sense of individual responsibility for making the right educational and occupational choices provides evidence that neoliberal ideology shapes young people’s sense of self in late modernity. Whilst the young people in the study had internalised neoliberal principles of self-responsibility, some found the expectation to make socially responsible choices challenging. One young woman, Raina, had taken on the role of prefect in her final year of high school to gain skills she could use to further her career, but these extra responsibilities made her final year very stressful and contributed to her falling ill in the first

semester of university. Although Raina dropped out of her university degree she planned to re-enrol. The authors argue that this sustained focus on education reflects the influence of neoliberal ideas in the lives of the young people. However, some of the young respondents also rejected neoliberal beliefs and expectations. The authors suggest that the young people's 'lives were rich in the messy realities of class, ethnicity and gender' (65), and show how some young people challenge neoliberal discourses. The teenage mothers in the study are examples of 'counter stories' to neoliberalism with their stories of failed school-work transitions and confidence that their new role as mothers will provide an alternative source of self-development.

The authors conclude that there was a tension between neoliberal expectations and the young people's own experiences. In the interviews conducted during the young people's final year at high school they 'hoped and expected that once they left school their lives would become simpler' but 'by the time of their follow up interviews many were starting to abandon the expectation that their transition would take an orderly, linear, form' (160-161). Whilst the young people's recognition of the non-linear nature of school-work transitions was associated with uncertainty, they nevertheless maintained a belief in their responsibility to craft their own identities and lives because 'within the meritocratic discourses of neoliberalism, however, structural constraints disappear and individuals appear to act independently (p. 174). International approaches to education policy and empirical studies of young people suggest that young people who do not make what is perceived to be rational choices only have themselves to blame since the free market has provided unlimited opportunities that they only need to grasp. In turn, unemployment and vulnerability in the labour market tends to be constructed as a personal deficit rather than being deeply embedded in social and economic change. This approach increases the risk that young people may internalise their failures through attributing 'failed transitions' to lack of individual effort rather than as the result of the complex circumstances young people face in a late modern labour market (Nairns, Higgins and Sligo 2012; te Riele 2012; Woodman and Wyn 2013).

The Australian education policy context

Like other Western countries Australia has during the past 20 years adopted policies and strategies aimed at increasing educational retention and attainment as part of the restructure of the education system (Rutkowski 2007). Specific initiatives and strategies have been in place for some time to accommodate the dramatic rise in years 11 and 12 retention brought

about by changes in the labour market. These strategies have been concerned with improving the educational outcomes of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Dusseldorp Skills Forum [DSF] 2004; Wyn 1998), with the introduction of Austudy (1986/87), which provides financial help to full-time students and Australian apprentices aged 25 years or more, and Youth Allowance (1998), for young people aged 16 to 24 years who are studying full-time, undertaking a full-time Australian Apprenticeship, training, looking for work, or sick (Department of Human Services 2014 a and b). Evaluations of Austudy and Youth Allowance indicate that these initiatives have greatly improved completion of post-compulsory study for students from lower SES backgrounds (Lamb et al. 2004). However, Lamb et al. (2004) also point out that the evaluations also suggested that income support must be complemented by factors such as the quality, value, relevance and availability of courses and programs to ensure these students reach their full potential.

Strategies have also been introduced to support a more inclusive curriculum which is able to cater for the diverse needs of students participating in years 11 and 12. School-based apprenticeships, traineeships and vocational education and training (VET)² in schools provide alternative ways of studying in years 11 and 12, enabling students to combine their study for the senior school certificate with work on the job or training at Technical and Further Education [TAFE] institutions³.

Although specific strategies have been implemented to accommodate the needs of young people and different socio-economic groups by expanding education to include a variety of VET choices, no measures have addressed the particular needs of young rural people. Some financial assistance through the Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme (Department of Education 2014) is available for rural students who cannot attend an appropriate state school because of geographical isolation, disability or special health needs, but no particular initiatives or strategies directly related to rural young people form part of curriculum development. There is evidence that participation in VET is significantly higher in low socio-economic and regional areas (Curtis and McMillan 2008; Fullarton 2001; Polesel et al. 2004).

² Vocational Educational and Training (VET) forms part of the Australian Education system. It delivers workplace specific skills and knowledge based competencies.

³ In Australia, TAFE provides a wide range of vocational tertiary education courses including business, finance, hospitality, tourism, construction, engineering, and community work.

Polesel et al. (2004) make the point that these higher rates may demonstrate that a substantial proportion of students have embraced new school–work pathways that offer different knowledges and skills than a traditional academic curriculum, and Fullarton (2001) suggests that the stronger social networks and closer school–industry linkages of smaller communities can explain the higher rates of VET participation in non-metropolitan areas. Very little is known about why young rural people engage with particular ways of studying, and it is essential to understand their choices to ensure they have access to the full range of options provided by the education department.

The concept of ‘pathway’ is a key idea in both youth and curriculum policies. Used as a tool to help young people map out their career decisions, its aim is to create an awareness of possible individual pathways amongst years 7 to 10 students. The pathway metaphor has been widely criticised for being too instrumental, economistic and vocational (Dwyer and Wyn 2001; Cohen and Ainley 2000) and for implying that young people who get lost on the way to adulthood only have themselves to blame. If only they had read the map better and chosen a useful pathway, they would have arrived safely at adulthood (Raffe 2001; 2003). These insights suggest that the pathway metaphor continues to support the construction of a linear conception of the school–work transition that is not truly reflective of the characteristics of a post-industrial labour market and the skills that young people need to negotiate it. The criticisms suggest that there is a need for transition policies to recognise the continuing impact of social structure on young people’s educational choices as well as the ‘yo-yo’ structure of contemporary school-work progressions (European Group for Integrated Social Research [EGRIS] 2001). The critique of the pathway metaphor connects with the key finding by Nairns, Higgins and Sligo (2012) that young people in late modernity have internalised the expectation that they are solely responsible for their choices because of the assumption of the Pathway metaphor that young people who get lost on the way to adulthood only have themselves to blame (Raffe 2001; 2003). These ideas draw attention to the importance of highlighting the continuing significance of structural constraints on the lives of young people and incorporating these factors into educational and transition policies.

The tension between the standardised curriculum and an insecure labour market

Although the primary responsibility for education in Australia lies with the state governments, the federal government has become increasingly involved with education because of a ‘vertical fiscal imbalance’ (Lingard et al. 1995: 42). Australian education policy at the federal level is developed by the Department of Education (DoE) and the

Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood (SCSEEC) and provides general direction for policy making at state and territory levels for both government and non-government schools. The broadest national policy statement guiding Australian education policy is the Melbourne Declaration on the Educational Goals for Young Australians [Melbourne Declaration] (MCEETYA 2008⁴). The declaration was launched in 2008 and builds on the goals for schooling established in the 1989 Hobart Declaration and the 1999 Adelaide Declaration, as well as the 2007 Council of the Australian Federation's report *The Future of Schooling in Australia*. As an agreement between the Australian education ministers, the declaration sets out the aspirations and goals for young Australians for the next decade and beyond.

In the Melbourne Declaration the Australian education ministers commit to eight areas of action in support of the proposed goals of: (1) Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence, and (2) All young Australians become successful learners, confident and creative individuals and active and informed individuals (Melbourne Declaration 2008: 8-9). The eight areas of action include supporting senior years of schooling and youth transitions, promoting a world-class curriculum, improving educational outcomes for Indigenous youth and disadvantaged young Australians, especially those from low socio-economic backgrounds, and a commitment to strengthening accountability and transparency (Melbourne Declaration 2008: 13-17). In general the declaration places a great deal of emphasis on equipping young people with the life skills for the 21st century. It describes 'individuals who can manage their own wellbeing, relate well to others, make informed decisions about their lives, become citizens who behave with ethical integrity, relate to and communicate across cultures, work for the common good and act with responsibility at local, regional and global levels' (Australian Curriculum 2015). The alignment between these skills and the needs of the labour market is especially obvious in the Melbourne Declaration's introductory page, which states that 'in the 21st century Australia's capacity to provide a high quality of life for all will depend on the ability to compete in the global economy on knowledge and innovation. Education equips young people with the knowledge, understanding, skills and values to take advantage of opportunity and to face the challenges of this era with confidence'. It is evident that those neoliberal principles that emphasise the

⁴ The Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA) replaced the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) in July 2009.

need to invest in people through education to support the economy and which underpin international education policy also inform the Melbourne Declaration. This is particularly evident in its twin goals to provide young people with the opportunity to reach their full potential, as well as improve their employability and productivity.

In line with international policy concerned with the transformation of the labour market, Australian schools during the past 30 years have increasingly been restructured around the needs of the economy (Down 2009; Wyn 2012), with the Melbourne Declaration emphasising the need to prepare students as enterprising workers for the global labour market. Whilst Australia's broadest education policies emphasise the importance of educating young people to be flexible and innovative, the introduction of another key policy initiative – Australia's national curriculum – aims to standardise educational outcomes. The introduction of seven general capabilities – Literacy, Numeracy, Information and communication technology (ICT) capability, Critical and creative thinking, Personal and social capability, Ethical understanding – plays a significant role in realising the goals of the Melbourne Declaration through their link to ensuring that all young people in Australia should be supported to become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens. However, without explicitly injecting the curriculum with elements to express the importance of flexibility and creativity in contemporary Australia, as emphasised in the Melbourne Declaration, there is a risk that a fixed national curriculum with standardised outcomes will work directly against these aims.

Australian transition policies and the construction of failure

One policy response to the changing labour market context and a rise in credentialism has been to negotiate the National Partnership on Youth Attainment and Transitions (Council of Australian Governments [COAG] 2009) which aims to raise the Year 12 (or equivalent) attainment rate to 90 per cent by 2015 from the current 73 per cent (ACARA 2012). This strategy consists of multiple policies and specifies a number of measures to increase participation, including compulsory completion of Year 10, and a mandatory requirement for young people to participate in education, training or employment at least 25 hours per week or a combination of these activities, until age 17 (COAG 2009). Pressure to conform to these standards is exercised through the restriction on welfare benefits for those young people aged 15–20 years of age who do not meet the target as well as restrictions on family tax benefits for their parents, resulting in these policies being known as 'earning or learning' (COAG 2009). te Riele (2012: 242) points out that whilst targeting all young Australians these policy

measures place extra pressure on young people already coping with challenging circumstances. This takes place in particular through neglecting to acknowledge school-based and societal barriers involved in choices to leave school early, and emphasising individual responsibility for personal decision making (te Riele 2012: 247).

The Liberal government's proposed changes to Newstart may exacerbate the emphasis on personal responsibility that characterises the existing 'earn and learn' policies. The assumption in these policies – that young people will simply relocate in order to obtain paid employment – may prove problematic for young rural people who are identified as being particularly attached to their communities (Fabianson 2006; Wierenga 2009). The introduction of a six months' wait for economic assistance may have severe consequences for young rural Tasmanians who decide to remain in their local communities, many of which suffer the highest levels of youth unemployment of all Australian states and territories (Brotherhood of St. Laurence 2014). It is likely that such decisions will also place pressure on the young people's families, to whom they might turn for economic support.

The continuing conception of youth transition as linear further exacerbates the risk of some young people internalising the failure to make school–work transitions that are deemed socially acceptable. The vocational and economic assumptions in the policies outlined above imply that the school–work transition continues to be linear and that such transitions can be largely achieved through self-responsibility and motivation. The difficulties of using this kind of approach in a rapidly changing social context have been noted by experts for some time in the argument that contemporary youth transitions are messy and reversible rather than linear and permanent (Du Bois-Reymond, M. 1998; Furlong and Cartmel 2009; Wyn, Lantz and Harris 2011). The continuing emphasis on linear transitions means that normative descriptions continue to be applied to youth transitions that are actually becoming increasingly diverse. This results in the labelling of alternative transitions as faulty or delayed (Wyn and Woodman 2006), increasing the risk of some young people internalising this failure as self-blame. This may have unexpected but serious consequences in terms of young people's motivations for re-entering the education system at a later stage, denying them opportunities for long-term social and economic gain and depriving the labour market of the contributions of talented workers.

There is evidence that Australia's education system needs to change significantly if completion, attainment and employment outcomes are to be further improved. Despite

decades of increasing expenditure in Australia, student performance has stagnated. Improving the performance of the 30 per cent of Year 9 students who have progressed to only the very basic elements of literacy, for example, requires not only increased funding but carefully constructed programs and initiatives which are sustained over a long period of time (Thomson and De Bortoli 2008). Current policy initiatives aimed at targeting retention and attainment tend to do so in terms of tightening the curriculum and the rules for retention and completion. In contrast, Wyn (2009) argues that the outdated education model developed in the 1950s for a relatively static labour market must be replaced by a new model that emphasises learning which takes place in other places than schools or in the community in addition to the knowledge of the curriculum.

Schooling serves multiple purposes, including democratic equality, social mobility, social efficiency and economic prosperity (Labaree 1997). Nevertheless, the articulation of Australian education policy suggests an emphasis on social efficiency and economic prosperity over other educational priorities. Forsey (2007: 167), for example, points out that ‘market forces have successfully marginalised the discussion of the democratic purposes of schooling’. The concern with increasing education retention and attainment in order to support the economy seems to have created a narrow vision of the purpose of education which neither closes the gap in educational retention and completion rates, nor helps young people to obtain the skills and knowledge to negotiate an insecure and unpredictable labour market. In addressing the need to increase the low Year 12 completion rates in rural Australia in the context of a highly volatile and changing labour market, I support Wyn’s (2009: v) suggestion that a new model of education must be a holistic one, including aspects such as ‘intellectual, physical, social, emotional, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development and well-being’. Such a broad approach would be better suited to empower young people ‘to negotiate risk, reflexively construct identities and make choices’ through an education where they learn ‘to locate and sift information rather than expect that to be done for them by a third party such as a teacher’ (Wyn 2009: v).

Low Year 12 completion rates and policy development in Tasmania

The key concern underpinning Tasmanian education policy is the low Tasmanian retention rates and Year 12 completion rates compared to the rest of the nation. Additionally, Tasmania also has the lowest number amongst Australian states and territories of young people aged 15–24 who are fully engaged in education or training or employment (ACARA 2012; Productivity Commission 2014). Lamb, in 2004, concluded that this situation points to an

environment where embracing the opportunities for manual work in Tasmania's labour market historically has been more important than getting an education. However, the high number of young Tasmanians not engaged in work or study also suggests that such opportunities are drastically declining in a globalised economy, leaving young people who do obtain further educational skills and qualifications vulnerable to unemployment and social exclusion.

The broad vision for education in Tasmania reflects the influence of international and national policies in its emphasis on students developing qualities of innovation, entrepreneurship and flexibility and matching educational skills and qualifications to the labour market. The Guaranteeing Futures initiative launched in 2005 aims to help young people obtain a Year 12 qualification or equivalent by raising their awareness of career pathways in schools and beyond. As a result of this framework a specific program, the Pathway Planning Program, was introduced in Tasmanian schools in 2007 to improve educational outcomes for students. The aim of the program is to help students clearly identify their educational goals and match these to possible areas of future employment (Department of Education 2014). Although Tasmanian policy documents to some extent recognise the increasing complexity and insecurity of the labour market, the emphasis on keeping young people in school and creating school-work pathways overshadows the question of how best to prepare young people for an unpredictable labour market.

Aims and research questions

In this literature review I highlight the continuing influence of social factors such as gender, socio-economic background and geographic location on access to and success in education. The literature reviewed also raises the question of the extent to which rurality influences choices to continue in or leave the education system prematurely, and to what extent its significance stems from class. Unravelling these dynamics is crucial to understanding the factors underpinning the low rural Year 12 completion rates which have remained persistent despite decades of policies designed to limit their effects (Marks and McMillan 2001; Panizzon and Pegg 2007). Furthermore, the research explored points to the possibility that access to and participation in social and cultural networks in rural Australia may be implicated in decisions to remain in or continue in post-compulsory education, but there has been little investigation of this issue.

The literature also provides evidence that some elements of educational policy complicate rather than aid young people's transitions from school to work. The narrow vision of the purpose of education that has emerged because of the concern with increasing education retention and attainment to support the economy has not been successful in closing the gap in educational retention and completion rates. One factor that may contribute to the lack of success is the vocational and economistic assumptions underpinning contemporary policy approaches which imply that the school-work transition is linear and that such transitions can be largely achieved with the application of self-responsibility and motivation. The discrepancy between a rhetoric of flexibility and mobility and the continuing emphasis on linearity through the concepts of pathways and pathway planning especially promotes the idea of individual responsibility in personal decision making and masks school-based and societal barriers involved in choices to leave school early. Understanding young people's responses to such policies is essential if the low rural retention rates are to be reversed.

Drawing on these insights, this study aims to contribute to an understanding of how young rural people's subjectivities intersect with their social environment to influence their decision to leave the education system or commence some form of post-compulsory education in Australia. Providing a holistic account of the experiences of young rural people has the potential to help inform policy development in the area of young people's participation in and completion of Year 12 by providing a greater link between the young people's own lives and the policies designed to help them succeed in education. Three questions have been developed to help guide this project:

1. What are the processes by which young people living in rural Australia subjectively construct their post-compulsory educational choices?
2. How are young rural people's post-compulsory educational choices shaped by their immediate social environment, in particular family, school and community?
3. How are these choices influenced by the policy environment, particularly in relation to education and the labour market?

In addressing these questions, this study has the potential to contribute to the sociology of education through an in-depth account of young people's subjective experiences of their education in a rural setting. There is an impressive volume of research examining the propensity of young people to complete or leave school before Year 12 and the dominant

research approach has been some form of multiple regression analysis. However, there are surprisingly few qualitative studies on the topic of young people's experiences with schooling in rural areas, although the literature suggests there is a significant need for this.

This study attempts to fill this gap through an exploration of the values and meanings that young rural people attach to early school leaving. In exploring the processes involved in young people's choice to leave or stay in the education system this study directly contributes to policies such as the Melbourne Declaration on the Educational Goals for Young Australians and the National Partnership on Youth Attainment and Transitions, which seeks to increase Year 12 retention rates to 90 per cent and increase young people's skills and qualifications. Early school leaving remains linked to such problems as unemployment, substance use and engagement in marginal activities. It is hoped that improving rural retention rates will lead to an improvement in the health, wellbeing and educational and labour market opportunities for rural young people.

Chapter 2: Theoretical framework

Introduction

Attempting to make sense of how subjectivity is implicated in choices to leave or stay at school, whilst also acknowledging the impact of broader social structures, requires an approach that bridges the gap between subjective practices and the influence of external influences. One of the most sophisticated contributions to this theoretical predicament is Bourdieu's attempt to mediate between objective social structures and subjective everyday practices with his concepts of social and cultural capital and the habitus (Harker, Mahar and Wilkes 1990). Exploring young people's decisions to leave or stay in the education system through the lens of Bourdieu's theory has the potential to provide insights into the low Year 12 completion rates in rural Australia through a focus on how external social structures are internalised through the habitus and manifested in individual practice.

This chapter introduces Bourdieu's concepts of social and cultural capital, the habitus, field and symbolic violence in the context of his broader theory of culture as a principal source of power and catalyst for privilege and disadvantage. It also introduces Simmel's (1950) ideas on the differences between rural and urban lifestyles, and Connell's (2005) theory of hegemonic masculinity. Simmel's and Connell's theories are introduced to help to understand the gendered and rural dimensions of the habitus. In this chapter I argue that using Simmel's and Connell's ideas to theorise the features of the rural habitus provides a unique framework for exploring the meanings and beliefs underpinning young rural people's educational decisions.

Pierre Bourdieu: Social and cultural capital

Early attempts to explain educational inequalities drew on Marxist concepts of class. Bowles and Gintis's correspondence theory (1976) argued that schools replicate the hierarchical division of labour and reproduce the social relations of the workplace. Willis (1977) and Connell et al. (1982, 1983) introduced notions of agency into neo-Marxist theories of education by focusing on the intersection between objective settings and the subjective experiences of students. They explained educational failure as the unintentional outcome of working class students' rebellion against what they saw as the hypocrisy of a supposedly meritocratic system. Later work by theorists such as Bourdieu (1990) attempted to move

further away from structuralist explanations and to acknowledge the role of culture as an autonomous sphere (Hall 1996; Althusser 1971).

Bourdieu's concepts of the habitus and cultural capital distinguish him from other theoretical perspectives on educational inequality (Webb et al. 2002). Bourdieu defines habitus as a set of durable dispositions which are inculcated and internalised in the individual and manifested and perpetuated in social practices. An essential part of an individual's habitus is their level of economic capital (wealth), social capital (the social networks of families and their relationships) and cultural capital (a form of value associated with such things as consumption patterns, social attributes, skills and awards) (Webb et al. 2002: 22; Robbins 1991: 32). Bourdieu pays particular attention to cultural capital because, he argues, it has become a marker of privilege and thereby social division through its association with knowledge. Through the process of symbolic violence, some groups are led to believe that such divisions are natural and legitimate (Jenkins 1992: 104; Bourdieu 1990: 4).

The premise of Bourdieu's theory – that social relationships are mediated by cultural capital via its association with a hierarchy of knowledge – affords a way to understand how young people's subjective knowledges and beliefs are implicated in shaping success and failure at school. In this study Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital is used specifically to explore how the young people's sense of place, school experiences and relationships with family and community differ according to their cultural knowledge and practices. The concept of social capital assists this analysis by providing a tool to understand how the young people's cultural knowledge is mediated by their social networks.

Because these different forms of capital intersect and create different social, cultural and economic dispositions, internalised and subjectively practised through the habitus, this concept is used to capture the young people's worldview, especially how they subjectively understand their choices to continue or leave formal education. The idea of symbolic violence, an integral but often neglected element of Bourdieu's theory, helps to explain how the young people come to perceive certain pathways as natural rather than constructed through cultural differences. Bourdieu's concept of field is furthermore employed to loosely capture the education system as a field in which a person's habitus assists or thwarts their educational attainment. In the meeting with the formal school culture valorised by the education department, the cultural knowledges young people have internalised through their

habitus are either constructed as valid or invalid, ultimately allocating them a particular place in the cultural hierarchy of the school.

Pedagogic action and symbolic violence

The overall relevance of Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence to this project's aim of understanding young rural people's school experiences and educational choices lies in the theory's key principle that no meanings and understandings are neutral but, rather, embedded in a web of power relations. These power relations, however, and the knowledges derived from them are invisible to most individuals who instead accept them as legitimate and true through the process of symbolic violence. Using this approach aids the examination of the subjective, contradictory or ambiguous feelings and emotions young people may associate with particular educational choices.

At the base of Bourdieu's analysis of the education system is the role of symbolic violence. This theory is systematically laid out in the first half of *Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction*⁵ as four main propositions and sub-propositions, and it provides the foundation for the theoretical applications carried out in the second part, including the development of his broader theory of social and cultural capital (Robbins 1991: 63). Symbolic violence is defined in the first axiom as 'every power which manages to impose meanings and to impose them as legitimate by concealing the power relations which are the basis for its force' (Bourdieu 1990: 4). Thus, symbolic violence is the imposition of symbolism and meaning upon groups or classes in such a way that they are experienced as legitimate (Jenkins 1992: 104). The imposition of meanings and values upon groups and individuals is achieved through the process of misrecognition, defined by Bourdieu as '...the contradiction between that objective truth and the agent's practice, which objectively manifests the misrecognition of that truth' (Bourdieu 1990: 12). In this way Bourdieu suggests that the force of symbolic power lies in the role of ideology whose function is to legitimate particular forms of knowledge and arbitrarily impose this knowledge on other groups in society. The theory of symbolic violence is a key feature of Bourdieu's model of social and cultural reproduction, although an often neglected one, which works from the premise that cultural meanings are expressions of an imposed arbitrary (Robbins 1991: 66).

⁵ Hereafter *Reproduction*

In *Reproduction* Bourdieu attempts to shed light on the relationship between pedagogy as a form of symbolic violence and the education system. To this end he proposes the four propositions of pedagogic action (PA), pedagogic authority, pedagogic work (PW) and the educational system (ES). The first proposition on the 'Twofold Arbitrariness of Pedagogical Action' posits that 'All pedagogic action (PA) is, objectively, symbolic violence insofar as it is the imposition of a cultural arbitrary by an arbitrary power' (Bourdieu 1990: 5). Thus, all pedagogic action is arbitrary, including that of parents in the family home, because the differential power relations in our culture are not natural or necessary but reflect the interests of the dominant groups in society. The arbitrariness of pedagogic action is twofold because (proposition 1.1) it contains not only the imposition of the cultural arbitrary, but also (proposition 1.2) the concealment of the cultural arbitrary (Robbins 1991: 63). One condition of PA is pedagogic authority: 'PA necessarily implies, as a social condition of its existence, pedagogic authority (PAu) and the relative autonomy of the agent to exercise it' (Bourdieu 1990: 12). In this way, PA logically needs the pedagogic authority of an agent to conceal the arbitrariness of its procedures (Jenkins 1992: 105). Proposition 3 shows how PA entails pedagogic work (PW) which operates to ensure that all members of society internalise the values arbitrarily transmitted by the dominant class. Pedagogic work is a substitute for physical coercion and its function is to keep order by legitimising exclusion through self-exclusion (Bourdieu 1990: 31; Jenkins 1992: 107). Proposition 4 deals with the specific symbolic violence carried out by the education system. One key argument is that the pedagogic authority of the education system facilitates the illusion that schooling is a neutral process unrelated to the overall structure of power relations. Schools monopolise the production of new teachers and thus inculcate new teachers in the culture that they want to pass on. In this way schools become self-reproductive systems which appear to be value free (Bourdieu 1990: 67; Jenkins 1992: 109). In this seemingly neutral environment the failure of certain groups of students is projected as their lack of natural talents and not as their inability to handle and decode cultural information which is alien to them (Gorder 1980: 341).

The forms of capital and the cultural arbitrary

With his concept of cultural capital Bourdieu seeks to explain how different forms of cultural knowledges and understandings are developed and possessed by different families through a process of cultural osmosis. This approach lends itself to this study's concern with the role of rurality in educational decision making because of its emphasis on the socially constructed nature of knowledges, and hence the existence of multiple forms of cultural capital. Thus, the

concept of cultural capital serves as a valuable tool through which to investigate the characteristics of a rural culture and its relationship with choices to leave or stay in the education system.

Bourdieu first applied his concept of cultural capital in *Reproduction* where he used it to analyse the unequal distribution of the cultural capital he found in his empirical data on the correlation between academic performance and social background in France in the 1960s (Bourdieu 1990: 74-75 and 92; Bourdieu 1986: 19). In developing the concept of cultural capital, Bourdieu draws on Basil Bernstein's ideas on restricted and elaborated codes (Collins 1993: 117). Bernstein's work focuses on connecting differences in class-based language codes to differences in educational attainment. He argues that because the social environment of the working class is often close-knit, local and characterised by a common cultural identity, members of this group of people tend to rely on a restricted code of communication characterised by grammatically simple and often short-hand sentences which convey dependent and particularistic meanings (Bernstein 1971: 297). In contrast, the social environment of the middle class tends to be much more fluid and diverse why, in addition to a restricted code, they frequently need to verbalise an elaborate code where meanings are made explicit in a universalistic and independent manner.

Bernstein further develops these concepts in his distinction between a visible form of pedagogy, characterised by performance and meeting criteria, and an invisible pedagogy, characterised by procedures of acquisition such as cognition and motivation. Bernstein contends that visible pedagogies are more likely to be embraced by that fraction of the middle class whose employment is in the economic field, such as in production and distribution, whilst the assumptions of invisible pedagogies are more likely to be met by that fraction of the middle class who are involved with the field of symbolic control (Bernstein 1990a: 202). Although Bernstein concedes the relationship between transmitters and acquirers of knowledge to be 'essentially and intrinsically' asymmetrical (Edwards 1995: 104), he also believes it entirely possible to reduce this asymmetry through '...a visible pedagogy that would weaken the relation between social class and educational achievement' (Bernstein 1990a: 79). Contemporary studies drawing on Bernsteinian theory suggest that the differential treatment of students according to their adherence to an elaborate code highlights how pedagogical practices and discourses can deny a group of children the development of knowledge that moves past the mundane towards the esoteric. According to these studies, the means to achieving social change in the school system is to make evaluation criteria explicit

while maintaining a high level of conceptual demand (Morais, Fontinhas and Neves 1992; Lubinski 2004; Rose 2004).

Drawing on Bernstein's ideas of restricted and elaborated codes, Bourdieu suggests that linguistic capital is one key component of cultural capital, and an especially important element in a context of formal schooling. In defining the concept he pays particular attention to the style, use and understandings of language:

Moreover, language is not simply an instrument of communication: it also provides, together with a richer or poorer vocabulary, a more or less complex system of categories. So that the capacity to decipher and manipulate complex structures, whether logical or aesthetic, depends partly on the complexity of the language transmitted by the family' (Bourdieu 1990: 73).

According to Bourdieu, style rather than content is the mechanism through which cultural privilege is reinforced and cultural disadvantage left unattended (Swartz 1977: 549).

Bourdieu locates linguistic capital within a 'system of manners characteristic of social position' which signifies the level of cultural capital possessed by groups or individuals (Bourdieu 1990: 118-119). In his (1984) work *Distinctions*, Bourdieu conceptualises cultural consumption and taste as key signifiers of social class (Jenkins 1992: 138), allowing him to move beyond the economic reductionism of Marxist theories of inequalities at the time of his writing. Thus, cultural capital can be conceptualised as a broad form of value associated with such things as language, consumption patterns, social attributes and educational skills and awards (Webb et al. 2002: 22) which shape one's position in the social and cultural hierarchy.

In his later work Bourdieu developed a more consistent account of cultural capital and divided it into the embodied state, the objectivated state, and the institutionalised state. An embodied form of cultural capital is incorporated in the body to produce the long-lasting dispositions of the habitus through the investor's labour. Bourdieu is at pains to explain how the acquisition of embodied cultural capital is a process of hard personal labour, with a vast investment of subjective time and effort (Bourdieu 1986: 19). Cultural capital in its objectivated form concerns such things as paintings, the media, and monuments. Although cultural goods can be purchased with economic capital, a form of capital 'immediately and directly convertible into money' (Bourdieu 1987, cited in Calhoun 1993: 70), they can only be decoded by a person with the appropriate level of embodied cultural capital. Institutional recognition can be conferred on the cultural capital possessed by an individual to form an

embodied cultural capital with a 'legally guaranteed value' relatively independent of the bearer (Bourdieu 1986; Robbins 2000: 34). Bourdieu points out that the forms of capitals intersect and that a high degree of conversion exists between them (1990: 19). For example, objectivated cultural capital intersects with cultural capital in its embodied state, as investors who are able to purchase cultural goods also need the cultural capital to appropriate or use them. Similarly, whilst some forms of goods and services can be readily purchased with economic capital, others need to be accessed via social and cultural capital.

The idea of cultural capital is intimately linked to the concept of social capital, the 'durable networks' of connections that 'provide[s] each of its members with the backing of the collectively-owned capital, a credential which entitles them to credit...' (Bourdieu 1986: 19). Thus the extent to which an individual can mobilise her 'networks of connections' is linked to her access to different forms of capitals. Bourdieu (1986: 20) highlights that these types of relationships do not happen naturally but are the end product of conscious or unconscious investment strategies aimed at establishing strong social relationships which 'implies durable obligations subjectively felt'. This takes place through the symbolic constitution of consecration and its constant exchange which requires mutual knowledge and recognition. In this way both the specific characteristics of the group and its differences from other groups are affirmed (Bourdieu 1986: 20). Once social and cultural capital are perceived and recognised as legitimate Bourdieu argues that they take on a symbolic form because of the prestige and honour they are associated with (Calhoun 1993: 70).

Bourdieu specifically developed the concept of cultural capital to explain differences in educational performance and cultural practices that remained unexplained by theories of economic inequality at the time (Brubaker 1985: 757). With the concept of cultural capital Bourdieu offers the unique explanation that social position is modified by cultural tastes and knowledges (Robbins 2000: 32) and thus points to the existence of different forms of cultural knowledge. His argument that these differences are turned into an arbitrary hierarchy of cultural understandings, due to the ability of the possessors of the dominant form of cultural capital to ideologically privilege and legitimise particular forms of knowledge, provides a sophisticated tool to highlight the differences and tensions between rural knowledges and the middle class urban forms of knowledge that characterise the curriculum (Bourdieu 1990; Brubaker 1985: 757).

Habitus and field

Bourdieu's concept of the habitus is an attempt to account for 'the internalisation of externality and the externalisation of internality' (Bourdieu 1990: 72). It is a complex account of how the objective social reality and the internalised subjective worlds of individuals are inextricably bound together in the explanation of how the reproduction of social, cultural and economic dispositions is made possible through the habitus and manifested and perpetuated in the social practices of individuals. Because social practices are the product of the encounter between the habitus and the structures of the social environment of the habitus, this concept 'rather than regulate what one does...tells one who one is' (Bohman 1999: 132). Thus, it has the potential to deepen the insights into how the young people's everyday world, their practices and personal views, relate to their educational decisions.

In his theory of symbolic violence Bourdieu introduces the idea of the habitus as '...a process of inculcation which must last long enough to produce a durable training, i.e. a habitus, the product of internalization of principles of a cultural arbitrary capable of perpetuating itself after PA [pedagogic action] has ceased and thereby of perpetuating in practices the principles of the internalized arbitrary'. Habitus, then, constitutes the basis for the production of certain practices in individuals. It is the 'sedimentation of history, structure and culture in individual disposition to practice' (Lingaard, Rawolle and Taylor 2005: 6). In a footnote in *Reproduction* Bourdieu points out that his use of the term 'disposition' particularly denotes predisposition, propensity or inclination. In the same footnote he defines habitus as 'a system of dispositions' (Bourdieu 1990: 67). In addition to dispositions such as taste and expectations that results in particular ways of feeling and thinking and operating in the world, in a later work Bourdieu clarifies that this 'system of dispositions' includes the 'bodily hexis': the physical embodiment of the dispositions and inclinations that make up the habitus revealed in the way we walk, talk and gesture (Bourdieu 1977a). Drawing on these insights habitus can be defined as a set of mental and bodily dispositions which are inculcated and internalised in the individual through symbolic violence and manifested and perpetuated in the social practices of the individual. Bourdieu furthermore clarifies that the process of inculcation is cumulative and that the 'specific degree of productivity of any PW [pedagogic work] other than primary PW (secondary PW) is a function of the distance between the habitus it tends to inculcate and the habitus inculcated by the previous phases of PW'. Whilst some degree of freedom or movement exists in the system of 'durable', but 'transposable' dispositions (Bourdieu 1977b: 72), this always exists within the restrictions and limits of the

dispositions of the habitus. Thus, the education received in the formal education system is always dependent on the education received earlier in life. Consequently some groups of young people remain greatly privileged within the education system and others disadvantaged.

Bourdieu argues that however diverse the conditions of existence may seem to the individual, they also produce certain ways of looking at the world and operating in it which are common for different classes. This class ethos is manifested in the differing dispositions of the different classes (Bourdieu 1990: 50 and 87; Harker et al. 1990: 123). In exploring the connection between the collective dimension of habitus and patterns of educational success and failure, Bourdieu argues that this dimension, for example, is constituted in linguistic expectations which translates into the fear of schooling and failure of working class students compared with the ease and confidence with which upper class students approach schooling (Bourdieu 1990: 87-88). This example forms part of Bourdieu's argument that one way that the habitus operates is to provide the individual with a set of objective class probabilities which leads to subjective expectations (Bourdieu 1990: 156), through the cumulative processes of inculcation of the particular repertoires affirmed in the home in the earliest years of life (Bourdieu 1990: 43). In this way, the habitus of working class children will on advance disqualify them from success because they will signal their unsuitability for education, and consequently the children will themselves recognise this and expect failure (Webb et al. 2002: 24).

Bourdieu suggests that the habitus operates in a field and refers to this idea as the 'genesis of the concepts of field and habitus' (Bourdieu 1985). Bourdieu likens the field to a field of sport, describing habitus as 'what in sport one can call a feel for the game' (William 1999: 185). The concept of field represents domains of social life in which actors engage their everyday practices to struggle over status and power. They are helped or handicapped by their habitus in acquiring and deploying the particular forms of cultural capital needed for success in that field. Norms and values of the field are constantly negotiated and actors compete for the transformation or preservation of the field (Bourdieu 1990: 443). Thus, Bourdieu argues, in the field of education, success is ensured by a habitus which is predisposed towards the cultural knowledge favoured by the middle class and practised in schools. In my thesis the concept of field is used to illuminate the complex interaction between different individuals taking place within the field of education, allowing for an

examination of the tensions, conflicts and struggles that influence the processes underpinning young rural people's educational decision making.

The role of the education system in reproducing inequality

Bourdieu nominates the school and the mechanism of awarding certificates and diplomas as the key institution by which the established order is maintained because the language and values adopted within schools are those of the dominant group. He argues that teachers always take style into account, implicitly or explicitly, in the assessment of students. Whilst children from backgrounds with high levels of linguistic capital feel at home at school and speak the 'pure' and 'correct' language used by schools, children from backgrounds with lower levels of linguistic capital are disadvantaged at school due to their 'vulgar' or 'common' language (Bourdieu 1990: 119). Thus he theorises that success in the educational system is largely dictated by the extent to which individuals have absorbed the dominant culture. Hence, cultural capital has real value which can be exchanged for diplomas or degrees that may then translate into economic capital in terms of educational skills and qualifications and powerful or desired jobs, and converted and reconverted to produce power and domination (Bourdieu 1990: 147; Harker et al.1990: 208). The link between rurality and low socio-economic status suggest that the knowledges young rural people have internalised through their habitus may not be considered 'correct' or 'pure' in the context of the education system, thus limiting their chances of further educational and economic success.

Examinations occupy a key role in translating social differences into academic differences. Exams appear to have the function of ensuring equal opportunities and promoting meritocracy. However, Bourdieu argues, exam questions express the values of the dominant culture and work to exclude those with low levels of cultural capital and reward those who possess high levels of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1990: 142). Yet most of those students who are excluded from studying at various levels of education eliminate themselves before being examined (Bourdieu 1990: 153). This is due to their previously poor performances in the education system which increase the likelihood for working class students to 'eliminate themselves' from secondary education by declining to enter it rather than to 'eliminate themselves' once they have entered...' (Bourdieu 1990: 153 and 159). This process of self-exclusion is the most powerful tool for the legitimation of particular forms of knowledge and the concealment of the process of legitimation because a student who does not sit her examination is believed to have poor academic skills rather than a lack of cultural capital (Gorder 1980: 342). The mechanisms that operate in schools to translate social inequalities

into academic inequalities exemplify the fundamental premise of the theory of symbolic violence, especially its first axiom which is concerned with the arbitrary nature of the hierarchy of cultural knowledge. These mechanisms and their relationships with self-exclusion and symbolic violence are important instruments used in this thesis to make sense of the young people's educational choices.

The legacy of Pierre Bourdieu

Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital and habitus enabled him to transcend the apparently irreconcilable oppositions of subjectivism and objectivism and insert agency into a Marxist framework without falling into economic reductionism (Harker et al. 1990: 1). However, Bourdieu's work, in particular *Reproduction*, was also accompanied by a large critical literature whose primary concern is the determinism of the work (Bredo and Feinberg 1979; Brubaker 1985; Connell 1983; Gorder 1980; Swartz 1977). Connell's (1983) extensive critique of *Reproduction*, for example, points out that this determinism operates on both the level of the system which seems to endlessly reproduce itself and at the individual level with the lack of meaningful agency. Gorder further explains that despite Bourdieu's emphasis on culture and the Durkheimian influences of structure and action which allow him to introduce notions of agency, his conception of action does not account for struggle and change (Gorder 1980: 343-344). Critics agree that Bourdieu's model of society is ahistorical, self-perpetuating and mechanistic, and subsequent studies of differential academic achievement in schools emphasise the existence of a cultural arbitrary as well as the individual's resistance of the imposition of arbitrary knowledge (Walker 1988; Willis 1977; Connell 1982). Yet his work on culture has also lead to the recognition that his theory of social reproduction is the best model available for theorising culture in social science research thus far (Smith and Riley 2001: 141). One body of research examining educational success and failure have responded to the critique that Bourdieu's theories represent another version of determinism by combining a focus on concepts such as habitus and capital with an emphasis on subjectivity. Previous studies drawing on Bourdieuan ideas and seeking extremely rich data about the subjective experiences of the young people in the education system include key works such as *Making the difference* (Connell et al. 1982), *Louts and legends* (Walker 1988) and *Learning to labour* (Willis 1977) as well as more recent studies such as *Masculinity goes to school* (Gilbert and Gilbert 1998), *School-smart and mother-wise* (Luttrell 1997) and *Making modern lives* (McLeod and Yates 2006). The early work of Connell et al., Walker and Willis developed a distinction between the formal school culture of the curriculum,

learning and teaching and the informal school culture of relationships and interactions between students and teachers that exists ‘in the gaps and crannies of the official institution’ (Kessler et al. 1985: 42). This distinction assisted them in illuminating the role of subjectivity in early school leaving through the young men’s conformity to particular subcultures and resistance to the formal school culture. In their work on gender, schooling and social change (2006) McCleod and Yates point out that Bourdieu’s concept of the habitus helps to understand patterns and continuity but is less able to account for processes of change and for how patterns of difference and inequality might take different forms in different eras. To address this they employ a longitudinal, and retrospective, approach which ‘allows for telling and retelling of incidents and times, and for initial readings to be recast’ (P. 201).

The strong association between Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of the forms of capital, the habitus and social background has led to the feminist critique that these concepts do not explore other features of the habitus, such as gender, ethnicity and location (Adkins and Skeggs 2004; McNay 2000; Schipper 2007). McCleod and Yates (2006: 92) further point out that a second key question for feminist analysis concerns what the habitus does not encompass. For example, the concept of the habitus might not be particularly well suited for understanding ‘the power of desires and emotions’ in the shaping of subjectivity. In making this point McCleod and Yates highlight a need to complement Bourdieu’s theory with other theories and ideas in order to understand how subjectivity is constructed.

Despite these criticisms educational success and failure continue to be widely explored through Bourdieu’s concepts of social and cultural capital and the habitus (Bullen and Kenway 2005; Mills 2007). The literature review has already indicated that parental support and resources are key factors shaping young people’s future plans, and research drawing on Bourdieu’s concepts elaborates on the importance of familial resources. This body of research suggests that although parents might generally support their children’s aspirations, some parents are better equipped to help their children realise their educational and occupational aspirations than others. Halliday (2009), through her interviews, concludes that middle class adolescents are embedded in resource-rich social networks that facilitate high educational and occupational attainment, while limited social ties, family instability, and parental disengagement produce disadvantages for working class youth. Devine (2005) expands on the advantages of the middle classes and demonstrates how middle class families use their social networks to ensure their children’s educational success, for example by drawing on their contacts in choosing the best school. A Danish longitudinal survey study

argued that non-economic factors, namely cultural and social capital, were the key predictors of educational attainment (Jaeger and Holm 2007). These observations shed light upon the link between socio-economic status and early school leaving in qualifying that economic resources remain important, especially in countries like Australia where education is not entirely free, and that the importance of non-economic factors such as social and cultural capital is increasing. Accessing such social and cultural networks may present specific challenges for young rural Australians, who are already disproportionately affected by struggling economies and shrunken employment opportunities (Alloway and Dalley-Trim 2009). There are some studies of rural Australia and Tasmania which suggest a link between the absence of the social and cultural capitals that might encourage decisions to continue on to years 11 and 12. In rural Tasmania Kenyon et al. (2001: 35) found that the value of education is not obvious to some rural families, and James et al. (1999: 90) noted the absence of 'the encouraging effects of cultural capital'. These insights confirm Bourdieu's notion of the importance of social and cultural capital in young people's educational experiences in the conclusions that career decisions are inseparable from the actions and choices of other players in their field.

Another body of literature has found that it is not the absence of a certain social and cultural capital that is linked with young people's decisions to leave school early, but the presence of a particular form of social capital. Sociological explanations of early school leaving in rural areas often utilise Bourdieu's (1990) concept of social capital to argue that young people's strong feelings of attachment to their local communities shape their decisions to leave the education system rather than continue their schooling in another town (Fabianson 2006; Wierenga 2009; Wyn 2012). A common finding in studies of rural communities is that rural people often express a deep appreciation of their small communities and their strong bonds with other community members (Bourke and Geldens 2007; Wierenga 2009; Wyn 1998). Kilpatrick and Abbott-Chapman (2002: 63) shed light on the consequences of early school leaving in rural Australia with their conclusion that the strong social networks of rural young people helped some early school leavers obtain jobs in their local area, although it also left them without qualifications and trapped in a rural labour market.

Despite these insights, difficulties in conducting in-depth qualitative research in schools has meant there are few studies which investigate the subjectivities of the young people making these critical educational choices in depth in a school setting, especially in rural Australia. Although some ethnographic studies investigating young people's, especially young men's,

experiences of education have been conducted in urban settings (Forsey 2006; Walker 1988; Willis 1977), studies examining young people's experiences of education in a rural setting have been limited (Corbett 2007; Morris 2008; Wierenga 2009; Wyn 1998).

This study utilises Bourdieu's concepts of social and cultural capital and the habitus in exploring how young rural people make their educational choices. It addresses the criticism that there is a lack of dynamics in the relationship between external structures and individual action in Bourdieu's model (Connell 1983; Gorder 1980; Swartz 1977) in its aim to provide an in-depth account of young people's subjective experiences through participant observation and in-depth interviews. This approach is inspired by a sociological tradition in educational research which uses Bourdieu's ideas but at the same time emphasises the participants' active rejection of the cultural arbitrary operating in schools (Connell et al. 1982; Walker 1988; Willis 1977). This study's focus on young people's subjective choices strongly emphasises the importance of agency and the participants' responses to the formal school culture, which helps to overcome issues related to determinism. It also draws on the established distinction between a formal and informal school culture in exploring how young rural people make their educational choices. By drawing on Connell's and Simmel's concepts of the gender order and rural and urban lifestyles as well as Bourdieu's theory of social and cultural capital a lens through which to interpret the participants' actions and choices and the influence and intersection of various social forces can be built. The synthesis of these theories and ideas is reached through the concept of the habitus, constructed as the intersection of structural forces through which different social, cultural and economic dispositions are internalised and subjectively practised by the individual. Using this approach provides an opportunity to look beyond purely economically-based relations. In its focus on the intersection of class, gender and rurality the conceptualisation of a rural habitus used in this study especially draws on the feminist critique that Bourdieu's notion of a class based habitus neglects to take into account other features such as gender, ethnicity and location (Adkins and Skeggs 2004; McCleod and Yates 2006; McNay 2000; Schipper 2007). Using this concept makes it possible to examine the hierarchy of gendered and cultural practices in rural Australia, untangle the young participants' subjective understanding of these practices and explore how they relate to the young people's educational choices.

Constructions of place and rurality

Although the literature review has revealed some important common denominators characterising contemporary youth experiences, young people's experiences vary enormously according to the characteristics of the place and space they inhabit. Keith and Pile argue that the spatial can include 'real spaces, imaginary spaces and symbolic spaces' (1993: 35), indicating that place is about identifying oneself in relation to a particular geographical place characterised by particular social, economic and cultural processes. Stegner (1986) describes a sense of place as 'the knowledge of place that comes from working in it in all weathers, making a living from it, suffering from its catastrophes, loving its mornings or evenings or hot noons, valuing it for the profound investment of labour and feeling that you, your parents and grandparents, your all-but-unknown ancestors have put into it'. The uniqueness of place arises in this interaction between the physical characteristics of the land and the human beings who inhabit it.

Unique places are constructed in rural areas which historically have been described in terms of their low population density, close-knit kinship ties, and a deep connection with the land through farming and agricultural practices (Bell 1992; Pahl 1966; Tönnies 1887). Since the processes of modernisation these characteristics of rurality have been theorised to produce particular forms of human behaviour and relationships, such as in Tönnies' (1957 [1887]) contrast between *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* and Simmel's (1950) comparisons between urban and the rural dwellers. The distinctions put forward by Tönnies and Simmel between rural dwellers who live and work with people they know well and urban residents who have limited or no intimate knowledge of their fellow citizens has been especially dominant in the rural literature. It is also one that has accumulated great nostalgic value.

The idea of a more genuine and authentic society is essential to the images and myths surrounding rural life. Short (1991, cited in Little and Austin 1996: 102) explains that

The countryside as past is often used in contrast with the fears of the present and the dread of the future... Households can look back to rural roots. The countryside is the location of nostalgia, the setting for the simpler lives of our forebears, a people whose existence seems idyllic because they are unencumbered with the immense task of living in the present.

In their analysis Little and Austin (1996: 101) draw on the concept of ‘the rural idyll’, a term used to describe ‘the positive images surrounding aspects of a rural lifestyle, reinforcing healthy, secure, peaceful, prosperous representations of rural life’. This idea that rural communities represent an antidote to a highly urbanised world is one that has become increasingly popular as modernisation has progressed, with its environmental pollution and moral corruption (Burchardt 2002: 207). This portrayal of rural life as offering a superior lifestyle is often underpinned by an agrarian ideology celebrating farming as an ennobling vocation that commands respect because of its association with hard work, perseverance and immersion in family life (Gray and Lawrence 2001).

Although powerfully overshadowed by the popularity of images and myths portraying rural life as tranquil and idyllic and relation as supportive, friendly and equal, a body of literature has pointed out that images and myths of rural Australia obscure the inequalities and tensions that also play out in rural communities. Both class, gender and ethnic divisions and their role in producing differential access to key resources have to some degree been explored in the rural literature (Alston 1995, 2003; Bryant and Pini 2009; Campbell 2000; Cowlshaw 1988; Dempsey 1990, 1992; Morris 2012a; Poiner 1990). Dempsey (1990) particularly explores the ways in which class and gender interact. In his study of rural life *Smalltown* (1990) he concludes that the existence of ideological and cultural hegemony ensures that dominant class positions are maintained and women’s secondary status in the community legitimised.

One body of literature explores how young people’s experiences and identities are mediated by different places (Leyshon 2008; Tucker 2003). Whilst the themes in this area of research in many ways reflect key issues identified in the broader literature on people’s experiences of rural life such as gender and class as sources of cohesion and division, there are also distinctive concerns for young people. Leyshon’s (2008) study of a group of young rural people in the UK highlights the highly contradictory ways in which young people experience rural life, with the young participants in the study both deriding and celebrating the construction of the rural idyll. For example, ‘knowing everyone’ was seen as a positive aspect of rural life, but at times it was also experienced as a lack of anonymity and intrusiveness. Similarly, the rural geography of open spaces and fields was at the same time interpreted as beautiful and isolating in the association with a lack of leisure activities. Leyshon emphasises the importance of recognising how such conflicts and divisions shape young rural people’s identities and argues that ‘...adults, young people, and social groups are constantly engaged in efforts to territorialise, to claim spaces, to include some and exclude others from particular

places' (2008:4). Tucker's (2003) study of a rural area in the UK helps to shed light upon the processes that shape inclusion and exclusion in rural areas. Tucker especially focuses on leisure and found that the limited provisions of leisure activities and privatisation of leisure spaces in rural areas worked to restrict young people's participation in leisure. Tucker stresses that in a rural space older and younger people tend to share recreational spaces, and argues that often the visibility of young people in these spaces is heightened, increasing the likelihood that they become subject to surveillance by adults.

Tucker (2003) and Tucker and Matthews (2001) also found that the surveillance of young people by adults was highly gendered. They argue that when girls experienced conflict with adults, this conflict was often heightened because adults viewed girls' participation in leisure activities such as drinking as a problem. Dunkley's (2004) study confirms these dynamics in the conclusion that young women often felt that their participation in leisure, and especially activities associated with the transition from youth to adulthood such as drinking, was limited and restricted by their parents and the community. Dunkley also highlights that there was a common understanding in the community that boys needed space to be boys and young women needed to be protected from it. Tucker and Matthews (2001) further point out that these gendered dynamics were reflected in the relationships between the young people themselves. They emphasise that the girls in their study were often marginalised and regulated by the boys for example through the use and non-use of public leisure spaces which were commonly seen as 'boys places' (2001: 166).

Morris (2012a) explores the micro dynamics that shape rural relationships in rural Ohio. He especially explores the intersection between class and race in his study of social differentiation among rural teenagers in a high school in Ohio. He identifies how many of his participants embraced the term 'redneck' as a positive local identity signifying whiteness, working class, resilient and tough. Symbolic boundaries between working class young people and poorer people were established through the use of the term 'rutter' which was employed to denote 'white people who are poor and backward' (Morris 2012a: 309). Through the use of these terms the 'rednecks' constructed a hierarchy of insiders and outsiders which provided a sense of pride in the face of global economic restructuring and local job losses. These studies challenge the dominant construction of rurality as tranquil and egalitarian in their findings that social divisions were construction through the intersection of class, gender and race. Massey (1991), in her work *A Global sense of place*, also raises challenges to the idea of the rural idyll. She maintains that we should resist romantic notions of place identities as fixed

and unchangeable because ‘place and locality are a foci for a form of romanticised escapism from the real business of the world’ (1991: 26). She argues that although we have a desire to maintain boundaries from otherness and protect our identities, the other is already implicated in constituting the meanings of place, and it is the global and relational aspect that constitutes place relations as progressive and evolving. Instead Massey proposes that a global sense of the local, or a global sense of place, is at the heart of contemporary place-based identity and is vital for keeping rural towns progressive Farrugia (2014) and Farrugia, Smyth and Harrison (2014a and b) support Massey’s idea of a need to move beyond the rural-urban dichotomy that dominates sociology to better understand identity formation in late modernity. They especially critique the sociology of youth for being metrocentric and advocate for re-embedding sociological analyses of youth in place and focusing more carefully on the spatial dimensions of young people’s identities while at the same time recognising how global influences on place shape young people’s sense of self.

Farrugia, Smyth and Harrison (2014a) support their theory with empirical evidence which point to the importance of local resources and immediate social relationships in the lives of rural young people while also highlighting how global forces shape their narratives. For example, one young woman, Emma, lives in a small rural town where she belongs to a small group of young people who share an interest in playing video games. She is also involved with the global community through online gaming and art communities and many of her significant relationships extend beyond her locale. Through these online relationships Emma has become involved with making art for comics and has become the concept artist for a digital comic magazine. Although her parents are supportive of her plans to develop a career in this area they insist she enrolls in a university degree, but she is reluctant to make this choice because it involves moving away from her friends and family. Emma’s story provides an example of the need to re-conceptualise space as ‘extraverted’ or ‘porous’ and recognise the spatially complex social landscape of a globalised world (Farrugia, Smyth and Harrison 2014a).

Theorising the rural dispositions of the habitus

To further theorise the habitus of the young rural people in this study, Simmel’s (1950) theory of rural and urban differences is employed to illuminate how rural norms and knowledges shape the participants’ habitus and their educational decisions. Because Bourdieu argues that objective social structures are internalised through the habitus and manifested in

subjective everyday practices, Simmel's theory that rural and urban lifestyles generate particular forms of behaviour may help shed light upon the views and beliefs the young rural people have internalised. Simmel's rural–urban distinctions also provide a lens through which to further explore the link between attachment to place and early school leaving in rural Australia (Bourke and Geldens 2007; Wierenga 2005; Wyn et al. 1998) through the differences between an 'unambiguous identity in the eye of the other' possessed by the rural dweller and the 'blasé attitude' possessed by the urban individual.

In his essay 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' (1950), Simmel analyses the struggle of the individual to preserve her individuality in the face of the 'tempo and multiplicity of economic, occupational and social life' (Simmel 1950: 410) of the modern metropolis. Simmel argues that the 'incessant stimuli of metropolitan life' (Simmel 1950: 410) build a resistance or an indifference to the sensory overload that metropolitan individuals are confronted with on a daily basis. The pulse of the city compels individuals to engage in a form of self-preservation which forces them to 'react with their head, not their heart' (Simmel 1950: 410). In contrast to the rural resident, it is not possible for the metropolitan citizen to rely on long-lasting and deeply felt relationships in expressing their identity. Thus 'the temptation to appear "to the point," to appear concentrated and strikingly characteristic, lies much closer to the individual in brief metropolitan contacts than in an atmosphere in which frequent and prolonged association assures the personality of an unambiguous image of himself in the eyes of the other' (Simmel 1950: 421). For Simmel, the calculated, punctual and exact attitudes that characterise metropolitan intellectualism lie at the heart of the blasé attitude possessed by the metropolitan individual.

With its fast economic and social life, the city sets up a sharp contrast to the slow pace of rural life and its 'uninterrupted habituations' (Simmel 1950: 410). Placed in the metropolitan context rural individuals are confronted with 'the swift and uninterrupted change of stimuli' (Simmel 1950: 410). Simmel argues that individuals from small rural towns are overwhelmed in the meeting with the metropolis because of the plethora of external stimuli, the shops, the crowds and close bodily contact. This is largely because they are accustomed to the 'unambiguous image of himself in the eyes of the other' (Simmel 1950: 421) through a more collective form of identity rather than an individualised identity capable of appearing 'to the point' when needed and then withdrawing from external stimuli in an attempt at self-preservation.

Although his theory is relatively dated, Simmel's aim to understand how rapid social change forces new social relationships is relevant to late modernity with its constantly changing forms of social relationships and cultural representations. Simmel's descriptions of rural and urban residents' experiences of and reactions to the city provide a useful framework for investigating the extent to which young rural people's educational choices are bound up with their perceptions of themselves as rural residents, and their views on the city to which they must relocate to continue their education.

Gendered aspects of the rural habitus

Although rates of non-completion of Year 12 are very high for young rural men, they are higher for both young rural men and women compared to their urban counterparts. This draws attention to the importance of understanding how gender forms part of the rural habitus, and how it influences decisions to leave school early. Conceptualising gender as part of the rural habitus also addresses the critique that Bourdieu's work inadequately incorporates notions of gender (Adkins and Skeggs 2004; McNay 2000). This study especially employs Connell's (2005) theory of the gender order to explore how masculinities and femininities form part of the rural habitus. Bourdieu's (1986) idea that an embodied form of cultural capital is always incorporated in the body to produce the long-lasting dispositions of the habitus (Bourdieu 1986: 19) and Connell's argument that gender is a highly embodied performance (Connell 2005: 54) are combined to investigate gender as an embodied part of the rural habitus.

Connell (2005) argues that what she terms 'hegemonic masculinity', a culturally idealised form of masculinity, ranks at the top of the gender order in liberal democracies and is associated with characteristics such as competitiveness, aggressiveness, heterosexuality and whiteness. Connell uses the term 'complicit masculinity' to express the idea that hegemonic masculinity is an idealised concept to which few men can actually conform, but is nevertheless the yardstick against which all men measure their manliness. Connell argues that all forms of masculinities that fail to meet the conventions of the dominant form of masculinity, as well as all forms of femininities, are marginalised. She argues that there is no hegemonic form of femininity in contemporary society but terms the normative form of femininity emphasised femininity because of its compliance with the principles of hegemonic masculinity. This form of femininity is characterised by conventional perceptions of beauty, thinness and nurturing qualities and remains prevalent in the media, advertising and

marketing campaigns, which ensures its continuing dominance over other forms of femininities.

Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as ‘the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women’ (Connell 2005: 77). It is clear from this definition that masculinity is a relational concept constructed first and foremost as superior to femininity, or emphasised femininity, which is constructed in the context of accommodating the interests and desires of men (Connell 1987). Hegemonic forms of masculinity, as the notion of ‘the currently accepted answer’ suggests, are furthermore dynamic, always changing and contestable. Consequently the ‘currently accepted answer’ can be different across time and space, and in different social and cultural contexts, such as rural settings.

Connell uses the term ‘complicit masculinity’ to express the idea that hegemonic masculinity is an idealised concept to which few men can actually conform, but it is nevertheless the yardstick against which all men measure their manliness. Although the majority of men are not able to meet the ideals of the dominant form of masculinity, they still benefit from the ‘patriarchal dividend’ (Connell 2005: 79). This dividend is paid off by participation in the dominant culture or conforming to the dominant masculine norms directly or indirectly.

Hegemony always warrants the domination of one group over another. Connell highlights that in contemporary society the principal form of subordination is that of homosexual men, who are positioned at the bottom of the masculine hierarchy. Whilst the most conspicuous form of subordination is that of homosexual people, this is not the only subordinated form of masculinity. The subordination of other male groups is evident in an everyday vocabulary of exclusion and inferiority, such as ‘wimp, nerd, sissy, cream puff, four-eyes’ (Connell 2005: 79); a vocabulary that clearly blurs the line with femininity and portrays subordinated men as inadequate, feminised males.

The term ‘marginalisation’ is similar to the concept of subordination, but refers specifically to the interplay of gender with other structures such as class and race, resulting in the oppression of one type of masculinity by another. Connell’s examples of Mal Walton and Eel (2005: 116), who are tough and strong and covered in tattoos but cannot read or write, demonstrates how hegemonic masculinity intersects with economic and cultural weakness to create a form of protest masculinity. This response to a sense of helplessness rooted in a history of poverty

and hardship and loss of the patriarchal dividend can at times result in aggressive claims to power. Alternatively, because marginalisation is always relative to the authorisation of the dominant group it can also contain elements of empowerment such as black athletes who are turned into a model of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005: 79). The gender hierarchy demonstrates how masculinity is socially constructed, and changes over time and in different social contexts. As Connell puts it 'hegemonic masculinity is not a fixed character type, always and everywhere the same. It is, rather, the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations' (Connell 2005: 74). In addition, the social construction of masculinity also takes place through its tendency to 'invest the body' (Carrigan et al. 1985: 595). The masculine gender is an embodied and lived experience, 'a certain feel to the skin, certain muscular shapes and tensions, certain postures, ways of moving and certain possibilities in sex' (Connell 2005: 53). Connell emphasises that this physical experience of gender is important for the way masculinity is perceived and performed.

Connell suggests that an assumption of a fixed, true, 'deep masculine' proceeds from men's bodies (2005: 45). She uses the term 'body reflexive practices' to indicate how gender is not natural but socially constructed and displayed through our bodies, and how our physical actions give our body social significance and meaning and communicate our position in the gender order to others. Connell uses the retrospective account of 'Adam' to demonstrate the significance of body reflexive practices to the masculine experience:

How a man throws a ball is different to how a woman throws a ball. I didn't want to throw a ball in front of my Dad because I knew it wouldn't look right, it wouldn't be like the way a good, strong body should throw it. And once, I remember, I was brave enough to throw it. And he made fun of me and said I threw it like a girl ('Adam' in Connell 2005: 91).

Here a particular form of masculinity is experienced through the body's actions and through Adam's relationship with his father and his references to 'acting like a girl' and 'throwing like a girl'. Through this interaction with his father Adam's bodily actions are constructed as being inappropriate for the male gender, influencing Adam's self-identity and resulting in him being placed at the bottom of the gender hierarchy. Using the idea of physical actions as an expression of a form of 'embodied cultural capital' that signals our relationships with

others has the potential to help shed light on the construction of the particular cultural hierarchy in Hillsville and its relationship with choices to leave or stay in education.

In Connell's work all types of femininities are subordinated to all forms of masculinities. She terms the normative form of femininity 'compliant femininity' because it is constructed in relation to hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987). She locates this form of femininity at 'the level of mass social relations' and defines it as women's 'compliance' with their subordination to men and 'accommodating the interests and desires of men' (1987: 183).

According to one study drawing on Connell's work, the consequences of the dominance of emphasised femininity means that 'Girls are pressured to make themselves "attractive", to get a boyfriend, to define themselves and other girls in terms of their positions in the heterosexual market. Although boys also enter into this market, it is less defining of their status and presumed futures, and, given the structuring of heterosexuality, it is they who tend to have the upper hand' (Thorne 1993: 170). This finding demonstrates Connell's argument that femininities comply with gender inequality through performances that accommodates the desires and interests of men.

Connell identifies non-compliant forms of femininities such as lesbianism as resistance femininities, and acknowledges that there are numerous complex strategic combinations of compliance, resistance, and cooperation in the construction of femininities. Even though Connell suggests there are multiple forms of femininities, the focus of her work is on the relationships among masculinities. In general femininities remain an under-researched area, and in the most recent reformulation of the concept of hegemonic masculinity Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) call for more research on femininities.

One piece of research which helps to shed light upon the construction of femininities is *Young femininity* (2005) by Aapola, Gonick and Harris (2005) which seeks to explore how femininity is defined and portrayed in contemporary discourses. The authors highlight that the construction of femininities take place in the context of globalisation and individualisation; a context which provides new possibilities for education and employment, relationships to friends, family and sexual partners (p. 7). Aapola, Gonick and Harris argue that this new social and economic context in which structural supports have declined require young women to take responsibility for their own lives and achieve successful careers but the expectation to achieve a particular form of femininity is at odds with the continuing influence of race, class and gender (p. 3).

The authors identify three major groupings of young feminism in contemporary society. They suggest that although some girls seem to reject feminism, the three different forms of young femininity are characterised by a personal concern with feminism. They identify power feminism as a significant form of feminism young women employ in their identity construction (p. 201). This form of feminism is integrated into mainstream society through its focus on formal barriers to equality such as political and public issues including childcare, political representation and abortion rather than private concerns such as sexuality or the body. It presents itself as a completely new approach that breaks dramatically with the two previous waves of feminisms and focuses on restoring women's status from victim to agent.

A second form of feminism is DIY and Grrrlpower (p. 203) which represent girls as capable, angry, tough and articulate. This form of feminism draws on previous women's movements, but argues for a girl centred femininity. Unlike power feminism it is committed to a view of the personal (sexuality, body image, relationships, impact of cultural representations) as political. Like power feminism it shares the concern to represent women as agents rather than victims and seeks to represent young women as angry and taking action. This form of feminism has been heavily criticised by high profile second wave feminists such as Greer (in Aapola, Gonick and Harris 2005: 204) who has commented that 'the career of an individual bad girl is likely to be a brief succession of episodes of chaotic drinking, casual sex, venereal infection and unwanted pregnancy, with consequences she will have to struggle with all her life'. Whilst some second wave feminists criticise DIY and Grrrlpower feminism for its complicity with patriarchal norms and values, some young women use this form of feminism to answer back to what they perceive to be a misguided form of feminism.

A third form of feminism identified by Aapola, Gonick and Harris (2005: 205) is third wave feminism. This form of feminism includes young women who actively embrace the third wave and identify as the next wave of feminists. It is a pragmatic form of feminism which expands and elaborates on previous forms of feminism and continues to emphasise the importance of implementing feminism in law courts, workplaces and on the street. It tends to be 'not as strictly defined or all-encompassing as previous waves, less punitive, less rigid, especially about personal choices (sexuality, fashion) and is keen to avoid easy polarities in identifying forces of oppression in women's lives' (Aapola, Gonick and Harris 2005: 205). Third wave feminism acknowledges the role of second wave feminism, but highlights the new issues and barriers facing women today.

Aapola, Gonick and Harris (2005) argue that these three categorisations are significant ways in which feminism is being taken up by young women in contemporary Western societies. Although each of them is contested in a number of ways, they are all 'primarily concerned with demarcating a kind of new feminism that sees young women as powerful, but not yet entirely equal' (p. 206). These understandings reflect how new young feminism has had to grapple with the opportunities and limitations provided by late modernity in which young women's lives are often represented as empowered or in crisis.

Both Connell (2005) and Aapola, Gonick and Harris (2005) highlight that the construction of masculinities and femininities are constantly changing and socially constructed through access to various resources. Connell's model has been critiqued for providing fixed character types which reduce the complexity and nuances of masculinity rather than emphasising the dynamic and negotiated nature of relationships (Moeller 2007), but Connell herself is at pains to point out that terms such as hegemonic masculinity are 'not fixed character types but configurations of practice generated in particular situations in a changing structure of relationships' (2005: 81). Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) specifically emphasise how the interrelationship between global, regional and local forces influence masculine practices because of the impact of globalisation on local resources and opportunities. Similarly, Aapola, Gonick and Harris (2005: 7) highlight that the construction of femininities take place in the context of globalisation and individualisation; a context which provides new possibilities for education and employment and relationships to friends, family and sexual partners. This thesis draws on these ideas on the social construction of masculinities and femininities to theorise the gendered aspect of the rural habitus. The interrelationship between global and local forces in the construction of gender provides a particularly relevant lens through which to theorise gender in a contemporary rural community undergoing economic restructuring.

Gender, rurality and early school leaving

Connell's (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity has been especially influential in theorising gender and educational success and failure. Hegemonic masculinity has been identified as a key factor influencing how some young urban men, especially those from working class backgrounds, experience school as irrelevant and feminine because of its non-physical nature (Connell 1982; Frosh et al. 2002; Mac an Ghail 1994; Walker 1988; Willis

1977). The classic ethnographic studies of masculinity and early school leaving such as Willis's, Walker's and Connell's studies from the 1970s and 1980s provide rich descriptions of the role of masculinity in the informal school hierarchy. Willis concluded that many young men left school early because of a view of schooling as effeminate and a strong sense of pride in their masculinity and the physical, unskilled jobs they were going into. They therefore used every opportunity to subvert the values of the competitive curriculum through aspects of their working class masculinities. In contrast Walker's study emphasised how elements of hegemonic masculinity such as aggression and competitiveness could also be used to succeed in the competitive curriculum, especially amongst students from higher socio-economic status groups. In a more contemporary Australian work of gender and schooling, *Making Modern Lives* (2006), McCleod and Yates explore how gender relations in a late modern and neo-liberal era are subject to both continuity and change. In capturing how their young participants negotiate gendered themes such as autonomy and community they draw on Connell's (2005) concept of the gender order and her conceptualisation of gender as relations between males and females' (p. 190). However, they combine Connell's approach with a 'more subjective and biographical focus to explore the shaping of individual students as gendered (and classed) subjects' (p. 191). To capture how young people negotiate changing gender discourses they particularly draw on Giddens' theory of the project of the self and the possibilities afforded by globalisation and detraditionalisation and Arnot's notion of 'recontextualisation of gender relations' as a result of individualisation and globalisation. They combine these two arguments to examine 'some of the specific and local ways in which young men and women are becoming their own person' (p. 215).

McCleod and Yates argue that many theoretical discourses are overstating the impact of gender detraditionalisation and neglect the ways in which new forms of gender traditionalism are being reinscribed (p. 190). For example, their interviews with the young people revealed how both young men and women believed that boys and girls have equal opportunities. In contrast to media discourses on boys and disadvantage in the education system young men in the study believed it was their own decision to 'muck around' because 'boys will be boys' (p. 195). Similarly, girls' preoccupation with body image was perceived to be normal but also pathetic. Kenway and Yates' analysis suggest that masculinity was regarded as normal and not needing to change whilst femininity was open to more scrutiny (p. 196). The authors argue that the contemporary concern with boys and schooling reflects these differences as 'much of earlier reforms directed to girls were about changing girls, and changing schools

and teaching to enable this. The current discussion about boys frequently presume that boys or masculinity is set, and the debates are thus more about how schooling needs to change to allow for that'. These findings confirm other research on the essentialising of gender roles and how this masks continuing gender inequalities (Morris (2012b; Ringrose 2007; Lingaard, Mills and Weaver-Hightower 2012).

In their analyses of the young people's experiences and choices McCleod and Yates illuminate how these choices are not only shaped by gender but also intertwined with other social structures such as class, location and ethnicity. They argue that 'the cultural imperative to reflexively construct a biography, to 'be your own person' register differently for women and men, and intersect with feminist calls for women to make new choices' (p. 197). For example, one young woman from a low income background, Keren, manages to complete secondary school after many difficulties and wants to enrol in a nursing degree. Her grades are not high enough to enrol in the degree, but on the advice of her teachers and career advisors she decides to enrol at TAFE in a nursing assistant diploma to gain some important skills and knowledge. Keren's clear plans for how to construct her future and an independent life is contrasted by Alan's story. Alan's mum is from North America and this international connection gives him a sense of ambivalence towards his local community. As Alan approaches his final examinations he begins to question his lack of effort at schoolwork and says he 'should have been pushed harder' (p. 203). He enrolls at a local university rather than his initial plan to move to a larger city because of his relatively low grades and finances. At university Alan continues to be torn between the need to move away from the local area for a job, possibly overseas, and feeling embedded in his community. Compared to the stories of young women like Keren, the stories of young men like Alan highlight a marked difference in how young men and women confront and actively plan their future.

McCleod and Yates conclude that young women to a much greater extent than young men have embraced 'the project of the self' and become enterprising and strategic subjects constructively planning their futures. Their suggestion that a group of young men do not understand themselves within the discourse of choice biography despite changed social and economic conditions collaborate other findings on masculinity, education and work in late modernity which indicate that some young men continue to feel little need to engage with alternative forms of masculinity (Corbett 2006; Frosh et al. 2002; Morris 2012).

A body of research examines how masculinities and femininities are constructed and maintained within a school setting to shape young people's educational experiences and choices. Davies (1984; 1993) uses a poststructuralist approach to examine how gender is constructed through dynamic and ever changing discourses by observing children talk and play. She argues that school play and texts support dominant gender discourses which reinforce particular ways of thinking and marginalise others. In one of her major pieces of work, *Shards of Glass* (1993), Davies asked students to identify with the main characters of a number of children's stories and explore the messages of gender implied in these stories. For example, when presented with the story of *Snow White* the girls would emphasise a link between femininity, passiveness and helplessness. Davies suggests that through engagement with traditional fables and stories the students 'become their own lived stories through a process in which they take up as their own the obviousness, the patterns of interpretation and the patterns of desire' (p. 5). A subsequent task asking the students to read feminist stories and write their own stories to challenge dominant gender discourses proved challenging because of their deeply embedded notions of gender. Davies (2003: 167) argues that 'children need to be given access to a discourse that frees them from the burden of the liberal humanist obligations of coming to know a fixed reality in which they have a unified and rationally coherent identity separate and distinct from the social world' by learning about the ways in which they are constituted by discursive practices and gaining access to alternative practices.

A large body of literature investigates specifically how dominant masculinities continue to be constructed in schools through their relationships with femininities and other forms of masculinities. Kessler et al. (1985: 42) suggest that 'the school as an institution is characterised at any given time by a particular gender regime' influenced amongst other things by the practices of students and staff that construct particular kinds of masculinities and femininities. The construction of dominant masculinities especially revolves around the humiliation and objectification of young women and the harassment and abuse of masculinities not conforming to the dominant form of masculinity (Dalley-Trim 2009; Keheli and Nayak 1997; Kenway and Willis 1998; Kenway and Fitzclarence 1997; Larkin 1994; Mac an Ghaill 1994; Martino 2000; Pascoe 2007). In the context of schooling teachers have been found to be part of the construction of dominant masculinities and marginalisation of other forms of masculinities and femininities through their biological explanations of behaviours associated with hegemonic masculinity (Dalley-Trim 2009). Masculinity may be a particularly important factor in explaining the low rural retention and completion rates in

Australia. The link between physical work and the construction of masculinities indicates that masculinity plays a major role in the lives of young men living in rural areas. Liepins (2000) makes the point that the construction of 'a true farmer' is linked to control over land and stock, and Peter et al. (2000) note that 'big machines that control the environment is 'a major factor in male identity construction'. Whilst the construction of rural masculinities is mainly studied in relation to the natural world (Little 2002a), there are some studies examining how rural masculinities play out in social settings. Campbell's (2000) study on masculinity in a pub environment in rural New Zealand contributes the two characteristics of 'conversational cock fighting' and 'disciplines of drinking' to the local rural masculinity he is studying. He concludes that these characteristics contribute to the reproduction of a particular form of 'pub(lic) masculinity' that is highly exclusive of women and non-conforming men.

Although the idea of masculinity has been shown to be particularly strong in rural areas there is evidence that conventional constructions of rural masculinities are changing. This is in line with broader research on changes in work and gender constructions which link the rise of the knowledge economy and the entrance of women into the labour market to the emergence of alternative forms of masculinities. These new forms of masculinities are often characterised by a broader understanding of what it means to be a man, such as Swain's (2006) 'personalised masculinities' and Anderson's (2009) 'inclusive masculinities'. In rural Norway Brandth and Haugen (2000, 2005a and b) examined changes in perceptions amongst forestry workers through analysing images in a Norwegian forestry magazine. In their studies they found signs of de-stabilisation of traditional 'tough' masculinities, with forestry workers and logger cultures giving way to a managerial culture and an emphasis on organisational aspects and expert practices. They conclude that mastery over heavy machinery was being replaced by control over economic resources. These changes in rural masculinities mirror findings by Peter et al. (2000: 216) which distinguish between 'monologic masculinity', a conventional, rigid and polarised gender expectation and 'dialogic masculinity' which places greater emphasis on social openness and has broader understandings of what it means to be a man. These findings also connect with McCleod and Yates' (2006) findings that a group of young men feel little need to engage with alternative forms of masculinity whilst others see themselves within the discourse of choice biography.

Research in Australia by Kenway, Kraack and Hickey-Moody (2006) also suggests that some masculine practices are changing as a result of new processes associated with globalisation.

Their use of place based global ethnographies of four rural towns reveal how the intersection of class, gender and rurality results in particular constructions of particular groups in particular places. For example, the authors highlight how economic restructuring in the small rural town of Morwell has ‘put [men] on the scrap heaps’ (67); a process they associate with the emergence of a form of ‘melancholic’ masculinity characterised by conformity to traditional forms of masculinity as well as feelings of failure associated with a lack of professional and personal skills to participate in the new economy. In contrast, the mining town of Cooper Pedy has benefited from globalisation and a new tourism industry in the area. Ironically, because of the boom in tourism Cooper Pedy’s traditional frontier masculinity might be declining, but ‘it has been elevated symbolically’ (78) because of the town’s inclusion in the global image industry. Nevertheless, the emergence of tourism provides new forms of employment and access to different forms of masculinities. This work by Kenway, Kraack and Hickey-Moody confirms the ideas of Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) and Aapola, Gonick and Harris (2005) and their emphasis on acknowledging the importance of the interrelationship between global, regional and local forces in the social construction of gender. Physical activity and sport, especially high contact sports such as football, have also been identified as key factors in masculinity (Connell 2005; Hickey 2008; Messner 2007). Performance on the football field has been linked to the production and maintenance of hegemonic and complicit forms of masculinities associated with strength, toughness, power and competitiveness, with those not conforming at risk of marginalisation (Connell 2005; Fitzclarence and Hickey 1998; Sabo and Panepinto 1990). This masculine hierarchy is especially relevant to rural Australia where sport and football have been identified as central activities in a context of few formal leisure alternatives (Tonts and Atherley 2005). For example, the findings from Kenway, Kraack and Hickey-Moody’s study of rural Australia suggest that sport and machines remain important to the young rural men’s identities across the four towns they were studying, and that rural spaces offer limited access to alternative forms of masculinities. Dempsey (1992: 57), in his study of cohesion and division in a small rural town, observes that ‘an ability to play sport’ was the key way for newcomers to be accepted into the community. He also found that sport provided the strongest marker of masculinity in the small town in rural Victoria which was the focus of his study. Not to be able to play sport or not to be interested could result in being labelled an outsider and ‘a bit of a poof’ (1992: 58).

A focus on sport in rural Australia is often linked to the development of social capital through sports participation and sports clubs, which are portrayed as sites for mateship and social cohesion (Atherley 2006), and spheres for the development of new skills (Spaaij 2009). Sport is often identified as a source of egalitarianism in rural communities, but a few studies suggest it also contributes to social exclusion (Dempsey 2000; Tonts and Atherley 2005), especially in relation to gender; high rates of alcohol consumption are also linked to male participation in football (Connell 1987; Thompson, Palmer and Raven 2011; Palmer 2011; Snow and Munro 2000). The well-established relationship between schools and their social context (Connell 1982; Funnell 2008) suggests that the emphasis on sport and football in rural Australia and the relationship with hegemonic masculinity is likely to represent an important aspect of young rural men's school experience.

Whilst there are relatively few studies of rural masculinities, research on rural femininities is an even more marginalised research area (Bryant and Pini 2009; Little 2002 a and b). This invisibility of rural femininities is reflected in Sacks's (1983) notion of women as 'invisible farmers' whose critical role in agriculture is often overlooked because their work is rendered not important compared to the work undertaken by men. Crotty (2001:10) also notes that throughout Australian history an idealisation of maleness comes at the cost of the devaluation of femaleness, stating that 'although exalted in national iconography, the state of the nation's girls seemed much less likely to determine national destiny'. Whilst some accounts point to the devaluation of women and their work in farming and agriculture, others have identified the loss of women's femininity as a result of their participation in rural life. Lake suggests that Australianness was constructed as a masculine characteristic, and that 'the bush woman, while indubitably Australian, sacrificed her womanliness' (Lake 1992: 312-313).

Attempts to describe the characteristics of rural femininities are sparse, but Bryant (1999) observes an association between 'feminine pride' and a nurturing and helping role in traditional agriculture in contrast to 'masculine pride' which centres on physical labour. Bryant and Pini (2009) similarly describes a version of rural femininity centred on nurturing and helping performed by engagement in fund raising activities and volunteering in the local service club. The lack of research on rural femininities is also linked to the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity and its ability to render women inferior and insignificant. For example, Brandth (1994) in her study of a Norwegian farming community found that when women entered men's spaces and began operating tractors, other types of activity taken on by males increased in importance because of their association with masculinity. Brandth

concludes that despite the reconstruction of masculinity, it maintained its definition as superior to femininity. Little (2002b) makes the point that embodiment is an important part of the continuing development of the understanding of rural masculinities and femininities. She argues that this area needs to 'look at ways in which constructions of rurality [are] performed through the physical qualities and activities of the body'. Little's call to focus attention on gendered performances of rurality connects with the theories of Bourdieu and Connell, especially the notion of the habitus and the gender order in their emphasis on embodiment for understanding subjective practices. Theorising femininities through these concepts may help shed light upon some aspects of rural femininities. Research exploring the influence of rural masculinities and femininities on educational attainment and choice is also an under-researched area (Corbett 2007; Morris 2008; Wierenga 2009). In his 2007 study of young people in a Canadian coastal community Corbett found that:

The particular social class structure and gendered labour market and a resource-based coastal community creates a variety of informal "education systems" that work to integrate young men into resource industry employment and into cultural and family traditions and practices. The result is that the particular features of the local labour market, coupled with local cultural codes, compete directly and often successfully with the dubious promise of schooling. For women, this restricted labour market creates the conditions for more successful careers in formal education as well as for mass immigration. As a consequence women were approximately three times more likely to leave their home villages and schooling was largely equated with femininity (Corbett 2009: 2).

Although Corbett points out that the young men in his study have stronger relationships with the fishing industry that dominates the small rural town they live in than young women, he also describes how choices to leave school early are complicated by economic restructuring and fewer opportunities for work in the local fishing industry. The desire of the young men to stay in their local town despite the decline of the fishing industry indicates the importance of engaging with a form of 'localized capital', involving embodied fisheries, related cultural capital, and the economic capital of fishing licenses, quota, and gear (Corbett 2007b: 783), to their gendered sense of self. The greater geographical mobility of the young women suggests that the particular 'localized capital' of the town is less central to their understanding of femininity, thus increasing their 'mobility capital'.

New local-global linkages were also found to be an important factor in Morris' (2008) study of young men's educational disengagement in a rural high school in Ohio. Morris found that economic restructuring in the rural town where he conducted his research influenced the young men's understandings of masculinity. A particular form of masculinity emerged in a complex interaction between class, gender and race and was termed 'redneck' by the local young men themselves. Morris found that the importance of the young men's adoption of this term was linked to its meaning of 'blue-collar, rebellious, southern and white' in the face of economic decline which had compromised the dominance of whiteness as well as traditional masculinity in their local community. In turn 'redneck' captures a sense of pride associated with belonging to 'a rough school' and living in 'a white, middle class rural location' (2008: 742). This pride was reinforced by the young men's distinction between themselves, the 'rednecks', and the 'rutter', a local term used derogatively about poor people which were cast as dirty. Morris contends that the young men felt a strong historical relationship to the traditional world of manual work in their local community, but because of the precariousness of this kind of work they had to employ practices such as physical dominance 'as alternative means to forge and prove hegemonic masculinity' (Morris 2008: 746). Morris concludes that the underachievement of young males in education does not represent a reversal of gender power but 'rather the latent, localized costs of maintaining the broader power of masculinity' (Morris 2008: 747).

In a rural Tasmanian context Wierenga (2009) found that manual work was seen as an expression of masculinity amongst the young men in her study, and that these young men overwhelmingly aspired to obtain manual work upon completion of high school. She found that 'connection to people and place within the known world is paramount', with some of the young men in her study deciding to leave school early for reasons such as 'I'm thinking I'll drive a truck...Uncle drives a truck, Grandpa drives a truck' (2009: 378). Wierenga's research indicates the importance of place in the construction of masculinities and educational choice.

The fluidity which characterises gender hierarchies means that each social setting, including schools, have their own 'culturally exalted' form of gender order and hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005: 84). Although statistical data on school retention and student engagement is often readily available, rich knowledge of teacher-student and student-student interactions remains rather elusive. In particular, since the nominal studies of Connell, Walker and Willis in the 1970s and 1980s there is a lack of ethnographically inspired studies of young people's

subjective experiences of schooling. Furthermore, despite the insights provided by urban studies, little is known about the culturally exalted gender order and forms of masculinities and femininities in rural schools and their relationships with early school leaving.

A theory of a rural habitus

Using Bourdieu's theoretical insights to explore early school leaving in rural Australia has the potential to significantly advance the understanding of the factors and processes underpinning young people's choice to leave or stay in education. Capturing the education system as a field consisting of multiple forms of arbitrary knowledges hierarchised through the exercise of symbolic violence should aid the understanding of the place of rural knowledges in a global cultural hierarchy of power, superiority and inferiority. In turn, young people's educational choices can be analysed in the light of their internalisation of a particular kind of cultural capital through their rural habitus.

Bourdieu's idea of a class habitus provides a particularly useful tool through which to theorise a rural habitus and its dispositions and inclinations. His argument that however diverse the conditions of existence may seem to the individual, the dispositions of the habitus also produce a class ethos which provides the individual with a set of objective class probabilities that leads to subjective expectations. This notion of a form of collective ethos affords a way to theorise a rural habitus with unique dispositions and inclinations.

Further exploring the inclinations and dispositions of the rural habitus through Simmel's theory of the metropolis and Connell's theory of the gender order provides a framework through which to analyse some important aspects of the rural habitus. In the context of low rural completion rates and the need for rural students to relocate to larger regional towns to continue their education the use of Simmel's distinction between rural and urban lifestyles may help to capture contemporary rural-urban differences, the young people's perceptions of these and their connection with early school leaving. Connell's model provides the means through which to theorise the gendered nature of the habitus and gain a better understanding of the dynamics between the 'culturally exalted' forms of masculinities in rural communities and their relationships with early school leaving.

In addition to the use of these theories to capture important aspects of the rural habitus, they may also be useful for elucidating some of the tensions and ambiguities associated with living in a rural area. In particular, Simmel's concepts of the metropolitan blasé attitude and the

rural unambiguous identity may be a particularly useful way to capture rural–urban differences in a globalised era where urban cultural capital and lifestyles are taken to be normative. Connell’s emphasis on the patterns of domination and subordination constructed through the dominance of hegemonic masculinity in the gender order also has the potential to capture how young people’s position in the gendered hierarchy relate to educational choices in a rural context.

The importance placed on embodiment by all three theories may also help to understand the young people’s experiences of rural life. Bourdieu’s notion that ‘the internalisation of externality and the externalisation of internality’ (1990: 72) involves a physical embodiment of the dispositions and inclinations that make up the habitus highlights the importance of embodiment in the constitution of the habitus. Simmel also alludes to the importance of embodiment in his descriptions of the importance of a place based form of identity in the lives of rural residents constructed through their lived experiences in the community. Connell’s use of the term ‘body reflexive practices’ to denote the embodied and lived experience of gender also confirms the importance of embodiment in understanding experiences of masculinity. These accounts suggest that embodied experiences may play a particularly important part in the lives of young rural people. A focus of embodiment may especially help to shed light upon how attachment to place, which has been linked to early school leaving in rural Australia (Corbett 2007; Morris 2008; Wierenga 2009; Wyn 1998), influences young people’s educational decisions.

Investigating early school leaving in rural Australia through the lens of Bourdieu’s (1990) concepts of the habitus and social and cultural capital, Simmel’s (1950) distinction between rural and urban dwellers and Connell’s (2005) theory of the gender order provides a framework capable of illuminating important aspects of young rural people’s subjective experiences of life in a small rural town. The examination of the young people’s practices, actions and views through these theories should help to shed light upon how the intersection between class, rurality and gender work to influence young rural people’s educational choices.

Chapter 3: Research methodology and methods

Introduction

The methodology and methods of this research is driven by the lack of research investigating the subjectivities of young people deciding to stay in the education system or leave it before completion of Year 12, and the need to capture these subjectivities. The approach taken in this study addresses this lack of qualitative research by drawing on the tradition of participant observation. Whilst the sociology of education has a long history of drawing on this method (Connell 1985; Willis 1977; Walker 1988), the literature review also established that there is a lack of studies conducted in recent times, especially in rural schools.

In this chapter I provide a summary of the epistemological and methodological principles underpinning the research and outline the process of conducting the fieldwork. This includes details of the methods of participant observation and in-depth interviews, as well as recruitment criteria, the recruitment process, sample characteristics and approach to analysis. The chapter concludes by explaining the researcher's ethical standpoint and describing the ethical implications for carrying out the research, including a discussion of challenges of conducting research with a group of people who at the same time are classified as young adults and dependent children.

Methodology In aiming to understand how young rural people's subjectivities intersect with their social environment to influence their decision to leave the education system or commence some form of post-compulsory education in Australia this research project is guided by three questions focusing on the importance of the young people's immediate social environment, the education system and the labour market (pp. 55-56). Answering these questions, with their focus on factors identified in the literature review as critical to young people's identity construction, provides a useful starting point for exploring how young people make their educational choices in a rural context.

In attempting to understand how young rural people negotiate their social context to construct particular educational choices this study assumes an emic approach which offers an insider's account of how young rural people make sense of their lives (Silverman 2001: 227). Thus, this research aims not to discover laws or regularities but rather to understand how young people interpret their world in terms of their emotions, beliefs and feelings

(Strauss and Corbin 1990: 11). Thus, it draws on qualitative methodology and develops an interpretive understanding of the processes by which young rural people make the decision to continue their education or leave school early by providing deep and layered understandings similar to Geertz's (1973) notion of 'thick description'. In doing so it also draws on Weber's (1949) concept of *verstehen* which suggests that a sensitive and empathetic approach affords a way for the researcher to understand social action from the standpoint of the participant. The concern with understanding young rural people's life-world and its influence on educational choice means that this research lends itself to a qualitative methodology. Generally, the study is informed by a broader interpretive social science paradigm which sees human beings as capable of creating meaning through social interaction, and underpinned by a constructionist epistemology (Grbich 1999: 7; Neuman 1991: 50). It particularly draws on Husserlean phenomenology (Husserl 1982).

Phenomenology is especially concerned with providing insights into how phenomena come to have personal meaning and how lived experience may not always be comprehensible to consciousness (Grbich 1999: 4). Husserl suggests that the generation of knowledge places upon reality as consciously experienced (Grbich 1999: 4), and all incidental aspects of the mental processes under inspection are bracketed to permit the scrutiny of the primary phenomenon. These processes shape a person's life-world; the way in which the world is experienced and the way in which the world is lived (Van Manen 1990: 10).

The everyday performances and habitual practices comprising a person's life-world (Schutz and Luckmann 1974: 3) form part of the micro-interactions and processes this study attempts to capture. Close attention to the immediate presences of the 'here and now' that according to Berger and Luckmann (1966: 36) is 'the focus of my attention to the reality of everyday life' may help capture the habitual practices and layers of meaning underpinning young people's educational decisions. Drawing on these insights should assist the study in uncovering how meanings arise in an 'intersubjective world' through the interaction and communication that takes place in an individual's immediate environment (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 37).

This study also draws on case study methodology to capture the habitus and lived experiences of the young participants at Hillsville High School. This approach involves systematically gathering various forms of information about a social setting or group to permit the researcher to effectively understand how the subject operates (Yin 2003). This holistic

approach allows for the generation of extremely rich, detailed and in-depth information about the phenomenon under scrutiny by enabling the researcher to capture various nuances, patterns, and more latent elements that other approaches might overlook (Bogdan and Biklem 2007: 66). In examining how the parts of a specific case are configured, case study methodology seems to be a useful framework for exploring how young people's social relationships shape their educational decisions as well as connecting their decisions to large-scale social structures and processes such as current educational policies and cultural context. In essence, the case study approach is 'a way to tell a big story through the lens of a small case' (Neuman 1992: 33).

This study shares many characteristics with ethnography in the aim to provide a holistic account of young people's educational choices. It relies on the bedrock of ethnographic research of 'understand[ing] another life world, using the self – as much of it as possible – as the instrument of knowing' through the immersion of the researcher in the community under investigation (Ortner 2006: 42). The 'thick' descriptions (Geertz 1973) which this study aims to produce are closely linked to the use of the researcher as the key research instrument through deep immersion in the research context. Using the researcher as the key research instrument maximises the chances of capturing micro-processes and 'cultural processes as they happen, privileging the here and now of the present' (McLeod and Thomson 2007: 81). Through its emphasis on micro-processes and here and now experiences this approach is well suited to develop the understanding of how young rural people make their educational choices because of its ability to capture individuals as complex agents with unique and possibly contradictory needs and aspirations.

Serious consideration was given to adopting a longitudinal approach in this study. The benefits of longitudinal research design for understanding social dynamics and social change is well documented in the sociological and educational literature (Corbett 2009; McLeod and Yates 2006; Wierenga 2009). McCleod and Yates' statement that a longitudinal and retrospective approach 'allows for telling and retelling of incidents and times, and for initial readings to be recast' (2006: 201) sum up the benefits of applying a longitudinal approach to understanding young people's subjectivities. Wierenga (2009) also reflects on how her interviews with young people twice a year for six years helped her to gain deep insights into the young participants' lives, choices and feelings about those choices. As Wierenga puts it,

the result of this process is ‘a film rather than a snapshot’ (2009: 46). However, time and budget restraints meant that it was not possible for me to extend observations into the whole community on a regular basis, or engage in the long-term relationships that traditionally characterise ethnographic research (Geertz 1973).

Methods

This study employs a two-fold data collection strategy consisting of participant observation in a rural high school and in-depth interviews. The participant observation involved the researcher spending three or four days per week over a period of 10 consecutive weeks at the end of the school year in 2007. At the very end of the participant observation, in-depth small group interviews were conducted with students, teachers, parents and policy makers.

This study draws on a form of triangulation in combining participant observation, in-depth interviews and formal education statistics. This approach allows for an investigation of early school leaving from different angles and provides a means to validate that results are dependable and trustworthy (Jorgensen 1989: 36-37). However, this traditional form of participant observation has been critiqued for its tendency to assume that ‘there is a “fixed point” or an “object” that can be triangulated’ (Richardson and Adams St. Pierre 2008: 478). Instead of the concepts of validity and reliability Richardson and Adams St. Pierre (2008: 478) use the symbol of a crystal to redefine the process of participatory research as comprising ‘an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities, and angles of approach...what we see depends on our angle of repose – not triangulation but rather crystallization’. The aim of the methodology employed in this study to facilitate an understanding of the participants’ culture connects with the notion of crystallization. It does so particularly through the ‘infinite variety of shapes and substances’ of the individuals I met during the research, in the ‘transmutation and multidimensionalities’ of their opinions and beliefs, and my own ‘angle of repose’ which continuously shaped the development and redefinition of concepts and ideas. Whilst the research methods utilised in this study are not centred around the notion of crystallisation, I draw on its imagery in my personal reflections and in the development of concepts. Using the concepts of ‘the infinite variety of shapes and substances’ and ‘transmutation and multidimensionalities’ helped me to maintain a focus on the young people’s subjectivities and the uniqueness of their experiences and choices to gain an in-depth understanding of how the young participants subjectively constructed their educational choices.

Insider knowledge through participant observation

Due to the lack of in-depth qualitative studies of young people's educational decision making, participant observation was chosen as a key data collection technique. This unobtrusive technique offered a way to gain an insider's perspective of how young people make their post-compulsory educational choices, especially their experiences of education and understandings of the labour market. It involved the researcher spending time in the participants' social environment to observe behaviour, action and interaction in order to understand the meanings constructed in that environment (Denzin and Lincoln 2003). The aim was to move towards a more comprehensive understanding of the participants' world by exploring how 'Insiders manage, manipulate, and negotiate meanings in particular situations, intentionally and unintentionally obscuring, hiding, or concealing these meanings further from the viewpoint of outsiders' (Jorgensen 1989: 14).

Through the use of participant observation I was able to capture nuances and details often overlooked by other approaches. Its emphasis on the multifaceted nature of everyday micro-interactions and meaning making processes lends itself to an investigation of how young people's post-compulsory educational decisions are tied to their everyday experiences and social relationships. The need to unearth the layered meanings and understandings underlying the young people's navigation of their aspirations in the school-work transition within the constantly changing paradigms of contemporary society, which Furlong and Cartmel (1997) argue are largely unknown to their parents, seem particularly reliant on an insider account.

This insider perspective allows the researcher 'to make unfamiliar the research arena, with which we may be very familiar' (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983: 128) by paying close attention to the participants' trivial and routine experiences. To help 'make unfamiliar the familiar', this research draws on Tripp's (1993) notion of critical incidents:

The vast majority of critical incidents, however, are not all dramatic or obvious; they are mostly straight forward accounts of very commonplace events that occur in routine professional practice which are critical in the rather different sense that they are indicative of underlying trends, motives and structures. These incidents appear to be 'typical' rather than 'critical' at first sight, but are rendered critical through analysis (24-25).

The very process of systematically observing and reflecting on behaviours, actions and interactions that is central to the method of participant observation has the potential to unpack

the meanings embedded in everyday behaviours. It is particularly through this exercise of making 'the familiar unfamiliar' that participant observation can open the door to the sense-making processes used by young rural people choosing to leave school as soon as legally possible or continue on to years 11 and 12.

I acknowledge my subjectivity and involvement with the young people who participated in this study, and have not aspired to objective detachment as previously advocated by, for example, the Chicago School (Lofland and Lofland 1984). Thus, I employ a form of existential sociology in this study. I agree that 'self-deception is not caused by involvement per se, but by deep-rooted emotional conflicts within the individual' (Henstrand 2006: 16). I chose this approach for its potential to maximise my understanding of the participants' actions and emotions. This reduces the risk of misinterpretations precisely because it facilitates my involvement in the participants' culture and access to their meaning making processes.

Participant observation: interaction and invisibility

Level of involvement in participant observation ranges from non-participation to total participation (Bogdan and Biklem 2007: 91). This study adopts a participant observation strategy similar to the total participant, with the specific aim of the researcher becoming a complete insider (Jorgensen 1989: 55). This strategy involved spending time with the students and the teachers on formal occasions such as in their classrooms and assemblies, as well as more informal occasions such as lunch breaks, and excursions, picnics and special school events such as the sports carnival and the school production. Interaction with students and teachers in a wide range of social contexts such as formal classroom situations, teacher meetings and excursions provided opportunities for exploring the influence of micro interactions such as student-student and student-teacher interaction on the young people's educational experiences and choices. It also provided opportunities for observing the impact of broader social structures such as the educational policies and the labour market on the lives of students and teachers.

I made a conscious effort to develop a strategy which could ensure that I was able to develop 'trusting and co-operative relationships' (Jorgensen 1989: 69). This was done by deciding not to take on any formal teaching duties because of the power inequalities implicit in teacher-student relations and the subsequent risk of compromising relationships with the participants. Instead my role at the school was one of a 'friendly visitor' and 'voluntary contributor to the

curriculum' rather than a formal teacher or teacher's assistant – and clearly not a student. In conversations with the Year 10 staff members it was decided that voluntary contributions could be made to the students' English and Studies of Society and Environment classes, such as my knowledge of Scandinavian languages, culture and food. It was considered that sharing these personal experiences with students and teachers would aid the immersion in the school culture.

To develop initial rapport with the students (Bogdan 1972; Walter 2006) and familiarise them with my role as a 'friendly visitor' in their environment, on the very first day of the research I introduced myself to the whole class and explained the research project. The following day I spent some time talking to the students when they were working in groups to allow them to get to know me and feel comfortable with my presence in the classroom. The sessions on Scandinavian languages and culture that I facilitated later in the research process were also highly successful in permitting everyday interaction to take place without compromising the relationship with the students, and provided invaluable opportunities for informal and casual interaction with students and teachers. Rather than portraying the researcher as an authoritarian figure or expert, these activities proved highly successful in terms of establishing a 'here and now' that could facilitate social interaction with the students. It was, for example, during a cooking session that a high level of rapport was finally established with a number of young men who had an interest in cooking.

Although the method of total participant was the dominant mode of observation, the nature of the participant observation oscillated between direct observation and interaction. For example, in the formal school context there was an expectation that limited interaction should take place during instruction time and individual working time. Such situations provided unique opportunities to observe whole class dynamics, in particular interactions between students and between students and teachers. To continue to develop these insights I continuously repositioned myself in different locations in the classrooms to detect any variations in interactions. It was through these opportunities to capture whole class dynamics that I gained my own insider knowledge of the immense power of participant observation. The emic insights gained from capturing subtle body language and gestures are perhaps the reasons why participant observation has been labelled 'the fundamental base of all research methods [in the social and behavioural sciences]' (Adler and Adler 1994: 389). In contrast, more informal activities such as group work activities and the breaks between classes afforded opportunities for more casual interaction with both students and teachers. The

combination of direct observation and the subjective accounts of the participants provided an invaluable way to detect gaps, inconsistencies and tensions.

Whilst a number of measures were established to maximise my immersion in the school cultures, it was considered crucially important that the strategy of participant observation was carried out in an unobtrusive manner. For ethical reasons, there was a need to minimise any potential disruption to the students' everyday environment caused by the research, but there was also a need to ensure the collection of a valid and high quality data set which reflected the participants' experiences in their natural environment (Jorgensen 1989; Denzin and Lincoln 2003).

A number of measures were taken to ensure my presence at the school was unobtrusive (Bogdan 1972: 30). For example, during my initial conversations with staff I took the opportunity to engage in some preliminary research activity. While walking around the school with the staff members I asked about the physical set up of the school and paid attention to the social and cultural dynamics playing out in the school environment. This initial contact with the school allowed me to gain a basic understanding of some of the school's youth cultures and enabled me to reflect on my own dress code and language use before meeting with the students for the first time. I decided to arrive at the school dressed in a neutral manner in jeans and t-shirt and trainers, contrary to many teachers who wore suits or skirts, and attempted at all times to stay conscious about using a plain and simple language free of authority or expert knowledge. To further avoid interfering with the students' natural environment I did not instigate conversation with students, apart from the initial rapport building exercises, but remained neutral and silent unless approached by the students themselves.

Within the first week of the project the students started to regard me as a non-teacher, and there were times when I had an almost invisible status. For example, when I was sitting close to some young men who were having a private conversation one young man became aware of my presence and made the rest of the group aware of my close proximity. The response of another young man in the group was, 'She's not a teacher. She won't care'. The conversation then continued as if I was not present at all. At a later stage I wandered around the corridors during class time and met one young man, Nigel. Nigel saw me and said, 'Oh, I suppose I really should be in class', but on further reflection he added, 'You're not a teacher so it doesn't matter', after which he chatted to me about the misery of having to be confined in a

classroom day after day. This successful establishment of me as a non-teacher aided the data collection immensely and limited a Hawthorn-like effect (Babbie 2002: 220).

Participant observation and the flexible research design

One major strength of participant observation is that it allows the researcher to be flexible and adapt to events (Yin 2003: 124). I utilised this flexible design on a daily basis by taking up any opportunities to engage in more regular contact with the students. Opportunities to join the Year 10 students in their lunch breaks and on excursions and picnics, and participating in their assemblies and Year 10 celebrations, provided invaluable opportunities for immersion in both the formal and informal school culture. For example, on one occasion a group of students approached their teacher to ask if they could invite me to come with them on a full day excursion in one of their personal options subjects. The relaxed atmosphere generated by a day out of school and the casual chatting on the bus allowed me to gain insights into the informal school culture, especially because the subject contained students from years 7 to 10. Similarly, when I participated in a picnic with the Year 10 students different groups of students invited me to 'come and see what we are doing'. This allowed me to further develop an understanding of the informal student hierarchies and how the young people's experiences of them contributed to their educational decisions.

The flexible design of the participant observation meant that I also had opportunities to observe interactions and observations taking place at the school in general. For example, there were times when I had to wait a couple of hours before participating in a formal class, and I often spent this time in the library, or wandering around the corridors or sports grounds. During these times I was sometimes asked if I wanted to walk around the school grounds with the teachers on lunchtime duty, and students frequently approached me during these walks. Another time a teacher who saw me reading a book in the library asked if I wanted to come and see what her class was doing. These encounters provided unique opportunities to gain insights into the formal and informal school culture across different grades, both from the perspective of students and teachers. This particularly allowed me to determine whether behaviours and incidents were part of a broader school culture or part of broader group or class dynamics.

I was also able to participate in the general life of the school by attending whole school assemblies, the school production, the sports carnival and the final Year 10 celebrations. Attending the school assemblies, for example, afforded significant insights into an anti-

school culture, and the displays of female and male body practices at the sports carnival highlighted the importance of masculinity and femininity in understanding the informal student hierarchies.

Although the research focuses closely on the students, conversations and interactions with teachers came to form an integral part of the research. To some extent this was anticipated, but interactions with teachers turned out to be more frequent and prolonged than at first expected. Teachers were frequently the facilitators of contact between the students and the researcher, for example when students asked their permission to invite the researcher to join an excursion or watch a drama performance practice. Whilst it was anticipated and hoped that the students would to some extent include me in their friendship groups, I had not anticipated that teachers would do this as well. Because of the flexible design of participant observation I was able to accommodate these unexpected invitations and join teachers in the staff room or participate in teacher meetings.

The research's unobtrusive and flexible design proved successful to the degree that the initial plan to consciously establish formal gatekeepers or informants was abandoned (Bogdan 1972: 13). By letting relationships develop gradually, access to a variety of student groups was eventually gained. Without these opportunities for spontaneous interaction, important information, such as the insider view of many young men's understandings and perceptions of schooling and their career decisions, may have been omitted from the research because of their initial reluctance to interact with me. To establish rapport with the cool boys in particular required me to take up any opportunities that provided interaction with this group, such as sporting events, cooking and language sessions. Having the flexibility to follow up opportunities for engagement with this group was especially important because of the members' rigid insiders/outsider view which was centred around elite sportsmanship and hard partying – activities that I (un)fortunately am not very skilled at.

Interviews

Semi-structured, in-depths interviews were conducted with students, parents, teachers and policy makers (Rubin and Rubin 2004: 43-44) to collect data about the processes and factors shaping the young people's educational decisions. The one-hour interviews were conducted at the school in a private room during school time for students (n=33), teachers (n=8), and parents (n=8), and at the [n=6] policy makers' workplace. Two one-on-one student interviews were conducted, but interviews were generally conducted in small groups of two or three

students to make the young participants feel comfortable in their friendship groups. In total 15 interviews were conducted with 33 students.

One important aim of qualitative research is to give voice to the participants through their stories. The choice of focus groups supported this aim because the young participants could participate in the interview together with friends who shared similar experiences. In this way the choice of focus groups constructed a permissive environment where sensitive topics could be safely explored (Krueger 1988; Wilkinson 2011). Small group interviews are associated with a risk of the interview being less productive because of their sensitivity to the dynamics amongst the participants. Morgan (2013: 14) points out that ‘the functioning of the group as a whole can easily be disrupted by friendship pairs, “experts,” or uncooperative participants’. I considered that the strengths of conducting focus group interviews outweighed the risk of the interviews being unproductive because of the young age of the participants, the need for them to feel safe and supported, and the need for me to be constructed as a non-authoritarian figure.

The interviews were guided by a flexible interview schedule⁶ evolving around the general themes of family, community and education, with open-ended questions used to encourage the participants to discuss these themes. The technique of funnelling steered these general themes into more intimate areas, such as the participants’ relations to family and community (Travers 2006: 98). This technique was also applied to address any disruptions caused by ‘friendship pairs’ to the small group discussion (Morgan 2013) and keep the conversation focused on key themes. The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim, as data was collected to allow the researcher to identify preliminary themes and modify the interview guide (Ezzy 2002: 70).

The interviews were used as an opportunity to further develop and unpack important themes emerging from the participant observation. Having already spent time with the participants in their natural environment, follow-up questions could be asked and particular prompts used. Direct questions from the interview schedule were asked, but some topics were covered elliptically as participants spoke about events or situations that they had shared with me during the period of participant observation. I was also able to use these shared events to cover topics in the interviews. For example, when asked ‘how would you describe your time

⁶ Interview schedules are available in Appendix A, B, C and D.

in high school' two boys, Gary and Phillip, answered 'We like school'. I was then in a position to challenge this statement and pose the question 'But the other day you said you didn't like school' This gave the participants an opportunity to elaborate on what exactly they meant by both 'liking school' and 'not liking school', exposing the co-existence of different beliefs underpinning the nature of the young people's experiences of schooling.

The strength of a cathartic-like effect of the interview process on some participants was unexpected (Lakeman, McAndrew, MacGabhann and Warne 2013). The opportunity for the young people to recount their time in high school provided by the casual interviews was accompanied by a degree of self-reflection, especially for some cool boys and wannabes. For example, in a conversation with John, Stephen and Paul about the difficulties of concentrating on schoolwork, John exclaimed 'We really haven't been very nice to our teachers, have we?', with Stephen and Paul nodding in agreement. Some days later one teacher, Ms Dawson, told me that the young men had come to talk to her to apologise for their disruptive behaviours and inappropriate comments. Having the opportunity to narrate their stories to someone not formally associated with the education system and connect their own views and experiences to those of others had a powerful effect on some of the dominant young men's self-understanding. The sharing of stories allowed them to redefine themselves as outsiders in the formal school culture to full members of the school community whose decisions and actions impacted on the lives of other people. This observation connects with Wierenga's (2002) notion of 'storying' and the 'thickening' of stories as we listen and share each other's stories. Wierenga's suggestion that information and personal experiences become more complex, more robust and more useful in the telling and re-telling of stories captures John's, Stephen's and Paul's new understanding of their own agency and the interconnectedness of students and teachers.

Limiting bias through self-reflexivity and empathetic listening

I acknowledge the significance of self-reflexivity, 'the researcher's active consideration of his or her place in the research' (Bailey 2007: 119) as especially important in participatory research where I was the research instrument through which the participants' stories were recorded and analysed. During the participant observation I, like other fieldworkers, became deeply embedded in the research context (Angrosino and Rosenberg 2011: 470). Therefore I made a conscious effort to 'turn on myself [herself]' (Angrosino and Rosenberg 2011: 470) to make sure the research was rigorous and any bias limited.

Consciously recording and reflecting on the observations made during the participant observation formed an important part of the research process. A form of self-reflexivity (Clifford 1988) came to guide my recording of the daily events. For example, when writing up the notes from the first two days at the school, I noticed that on several occasions participants had a set agenda when interacting with me. Emily and Tina on one occasion told me 'If you want to do something for us get rid of those dickheads over there [the cool boys and some wannabes]'. Whilst Emily and Tina had a particular agenda, other students tended to see me as a tool to make sure their stories were heard. For example, having established that I was indeed a neutral and unbiased researcher, Anne, Anita and Nina decided to reveal to me that they were not actually choosing to go on to college as they had told their teachers, but that they would rather 'do anything else than school [Anita]' because of their experiences of marginalisation. Teachers also choose to reveal particular details about particular students. After a chaotic lesson involving a mock fight between several male students, one teacher, Mrs Willis, told me that there were major differences between these students and that 'Paul is a sneaky person ... it might seem that he and John are similar, but you can trust John a lot more'. Applying self-reflexivity to such stories and conversations generated an acute awareness that the participants were active, knowing subjects who were conscious of their position in the social hierarchy at the school and the decisions they were making.

The process of self-reflexivity also afforded a way to manage my own subjectivity since this was so deeply embedded in the research process (Angrosino and Rosenberg 2011). Combining self-reflexivity with the notion of crystallisation (Richardson and Adams St. Pierre 2008) provided some solid tools to scrutinise how my own gender, class, locality, culture and age influenced my interactions with the participants, and brought to the research an acute awareness that recognising my own reactions and perceptions of events was crucial to the success of the research. For example, from the beginning of the research I was confronted with scenarios of the cool boys and wannabes dominating the formal and informal school cultures and marginalising other student groups. My first response was quite reactionary. I was shocked at this behaviour and frustrated on behalf of the students who were marginalised. However, after applying self-reflexivity to these observations and dissecting how my own reactions were crystallised in terms of being middle class, urban and European, I was able to more vigorously apply 'verstehen' in my observations and listening skills when chatting to the boys. My understanding of the boys' behaviour significantly changed when

applying self-reflexivity to my observations of, and conversations with, them, and I was more clearly able to see the influences of rurality, class and gender on their lives.

During the time of the participant observation a field diary was maintained at all times to ensure that events and experiences were recorded as soon as possible (Jorgensen 1989: 104). Daily events involving students, teachers, administrative staff and parents were recorded in this diary, as well as details of events, conversations and observations, and insights about these. It was necessary to record events several times throughout the day, as many conversations could occur in a short period of time. Initially skeletal notes were written up at a private location at the school such as the library or an outside area, whilst the bathroom was reserved for the most urgent recording of events. A more substantial account of daily events was written up in NVivo later in the day. The period of participant observation was significantly more intense than expected and surprisingly draining. Therefore days not spent on observing provided a welcome opportunity to retreat from the field and reflect on the data. I could then return to the field again with renewed energy and a clearer understanding of the dynamics operating at the school.

At the end of each day a section outlining emerging themes, preliminary analysis and interpretation was also provided in the field diary. This was especially helpful in the early stages of the research, as it helped to discover gaps in the data and areas in need of further investigation. As a part of these practical sections I developed a habit of asking participants their opinion on emerging themes to further develop the knowledge on a particular issue. For example, when asking some teachers ‘to what extent do you see gender as influencing the students’ experiences of schooling?’, I was surprised to learn that gender was not perceived to be a significant factor. Learning this enabled me to target the theme of students’ and teachers’ perceptions of gender in a more focused manner when it occurred in observations and conversations.

Sampling

In order to investigate how the link between early school leaving, class, rurality and gender was subjectively experienced by young people making the choice to leave or stay in the education system, a high school located in a rural area of relatively low socio-economic standing was sought. It was furthermore a mixed gender, non-streamed public high school catering for a predominantly working class clientele, with a sprinkling of students from more affluent backgrounds. It had a long history of early school leaving and low retention rates and

was situated in a geographically isolated area where opportunities for manual labour remained strong in some primary industries. Yet youth unemployment among 15-19-year-olds was more than 17 per cent (Labour Economics Office 2006). The selected school was given the fictitious name of Hillsville High School.

The key sample population for the study was rural Year 10 students deciding whether to leave or continue their education at Hillsville High in rural Tasmania. The selection criteria for the sample were a balance of students who fell into one of the following categories:

1. Students who had decided to leave the education system completely or who were undecided about what to do.
2. Students who had decided to continue their education.

An approximate gender mix of forty four students meeting these criteria was recruited from Hillsville High School as shown in the table of participants below.

Table 1: Student respondent details

Student	Group membership	School achievement	Family community position	Social capital	Parental occupation	Future plans
Robert	Cool boys	Low	Intergenerational	Local	Owner-manager	Unsure
Ralph	Cool boys	Low	Intergenerational	Local	Labourers	Leaving
Stephen	Cool boys	Low	Intergenerational	Local-global	Management	Leaving
Ryan	Wannabes	Average	Long-term	Local-global	Technician and trades workers	Unsure
Billy	Wannabes	High	Long-term	Local-global	Professional	Staying
Bruce	Wannabes	High	New	Global	Professional	Staying
Connor	Wannabes	Low	Long-term	Local	Not known	Leaving
John	Wannabes	Low	Intergenerational	Local	Technician and trades workers	Leaving
Dallas	Wannabes	Low	Intergenerational	Local	Labourers	Leaving
Gary	Wannabes	Low	Long-term	Local	Labourers	Leaving
Phillip	Wannabes	Low	Long-term	Local-global	Technician and trades workers	Unsure
Henry	Wannabes	Low	Not known	Not known	labourers	Left before completion of Year 10
Nigel	Wannabes	Low	Intergenerational	Local-global	Machinery operator and drivers	Staying
William	Wannabes	High	Long-term	Global	Professional	Staying

Colin	Wannabes	Low	Not known	Not known	Not known	Not known
Nick	Wannabes	Average	Recent	Local-global	Manager	Leaving
Thomas	Wannabes	Average	Intergenerational	Local	Labourers	Leaving
Shaun	Wannabes	Low	Not known	Not known	Labourers	Left before completion of Year 10
Rose	Cool girls	Average	Intergenerational	Local-global	Owner-manager	Leaving
Trudy	Cool girls	Average	Intergenerational	Local	Owner-manager	Leaving
Debbie	Cool girls	Low	Long-term	Local	Clerical and administrative workers	Unsure
Natalie	Cool girls	High	Intergenerational	Local	Now known	Staying
Susan	Quiet girls	High	Intergenerational	Local-global	Owner-manager	Leaving
Wendy	Quiet girls	Average	Long-term	Local	Clerical and administrative workers	Leaving
Kristin	Quiet girls	High	Recent	Global	Owner-manager	Staying
Maggie	Quiet girls	Average	Intergenerational	Local	Sales workers	Unsure
Anita	Quiet girls	High	Intergenerational	Local	Owner-manager	Leaving
Anne	Quiet girls	High	Intergenerational	Local	Manager	Leaving
Nina	Quiet girls	Average	Intergenerational	Local	Machinery operators and drivers	Unsure
Emily	Quiet girls	High	Long-term	Local-global	Technician and trades workers	Staying
Emma	Quiet girls	Not known	Not known	Not known	Not known	Leaving
Tina	Quiet girls	Low	Intergenerational	Local	Clerical and administrative workers	Staying
Lauren	Quiet girls	High	Recent	Local-global	Manager	Staying
Sarah	Quiet girls	Average	Intergenerational	Local	Labourers	Leaving
Paula	Quiet girls	Low	Not known	Not known	Not known	Leaving
Harry	Nerds	Average	Intergenerational	Local	Labourers	Staying
Neville	Nerds	High	Long-term	Local-global	Manager	Staying
Stanley	Nerds	Average	Intergenerational	Local-global	Clerical and administrative workers	Staying
Erin	Ghetto people	Average	Intergenerational	Local	Labourers	Staying
Megan	Ghetto people	Average	Intergenerational	Local	Labourers	Staying
Peter	Ghetto people	Low	Intergenerational	Local	Labourers	Staying
Beverly	Ghetto people	Low	Intergenerational	Local	Labourers	Unsure
Karen	Ghetto people	Low	Intergenerational	Local	Labourers	Staying
Sally	Ghetto people	Low	Not known	Not known	Not known	Not known

Information about the participants was obtained from the participants themselves, other participants and observations from the participant observation. The data especially highlighted the importance of a number of key characteristics in the lives of the young people. These characteristics are not fixed, but are used in the table above to capture some important factors shaping the young people's lives as suggested by the data.

The young participants themselves as well as their parents and teachers often defined the young people according to their position in the student hierarchy at Hillsville High, and membership in these groups was somewhat related to school engagement and attainment. The young people were also often defined by their relationship with the community. The term 'position on the community' is used to describe the young people's relationship with the community as inter-generational, long-term or recent. The term intergenerational is used to refer to young people from families in which at least one parent has intergenerational ties to the area going back more than one generation. The term long-term is used to refer to the young people who are born in the area but may not have intergenerational connections and the term recent is used to describe young people who had migrated to Hillsville. There was a link between the young people's position on the community and the nature of their social capital. In particular, young people characterised by intergenerational relationships with the community were more likely to possess tight-knit local social networks and local knowledges than young people who were characterised by a long-term or new relationship with the community. There was also a link between the young people's social capital and parental occupation. Drawing on the ABS' (2013h) Australian Standard Classification of Occupations scheme parental occupation is described as the parent with the highest skills level and specialisation. The young people's educational decisions tended to be influenced by the nature of their social capital, with young people whose networks and knowledges were grounded in the local area more likely to leave school early.

A decision to select two grade 10 classes rather than all the grade 10 classes at the School was made in order to have sufficient participants to facilitate an insight into the culture of the young people at the school whilst keeping numbers low enough to allow the researcher to form connections with at least some groups or individuals. 44 students were involved in the participant observation, although the school attendance of six students was so irregular that

no meaningful observations could be made. Thirty-three participants accepted the invitation to participate in an interview.

To further understand the factors and processes underpinning the young people's decisions to leave school before completion of year 12 or continue on to years 11 and 12 sub-samples of teachers, parents and policy makers were also sought. Nine teachers, eight parents and six policy makers were also recruited to participate in an interview.

During the participant observation I was involved with eight core Grade 10 teachers on a daily basis. All of these teachers, except from Mr. Monday and Mrs. Hudson who were both sick on the day their interviews were scheduled, also participated in a formal one on one interview at the end of the participant observation. However, during the participant observation I also became involved with 11 Grade 7, 8 and 9 teachers. Three of these teachers, Ms. Carpenter, Ms. Dickinson and Ms. Grant, were recruited for an interview because their previous involvement with the selected Grade 10 classes meant they were able to add insights into the factors influencing the educational choices of these students.

All teachers were of Anglo-Saxon origin, with the exception of one teacher with Indigenous background, and ages ranged from early twenties to late fifties. Three teachers had taught at Hillsville High for between 15-20 years and were either born in Hillsville or came from other rural backgrounds. Four teachers aged in their twenties were very new to the School and came from urban or regional backgrounds. Two teachers were middle-aged with previous teaching experience who had recently transferred to Hillsville High. The teacher interviews were important for the study because they provided a way to further unpack themes and observations from the participant observation. These interviews especially helped to shed light upon the dynamics of student-teacher relationships and their impact on the student hierarchy at Hillsville High.

Table 2: Teacher respondent details

Leadership team	Year 10 teachers	Other teachers
Mr. Fielding (Principal)	Ms. Dawson	Mrs. Baker
Mrs. Anderson (Assistant Principal)	Mrs. Hudson	Ms. Carpenter
Ms. Willis (Assistant Principal)	Mr. Marshall	Ms. Dickinson
	Mr. Monday	Ms. Grant
	Mrs. Willis	Mrs. Green

		Ms. Howard
		Mr. Jensen
		Mrs. Lambert
		Mrs. Norton
		Mrs. Norton
		Ms. White

Seven parents participated in a formal, semi-structured interview. This small sample was especially characterised by their middle class, Anglo-Saxon backgrounds; four individuals were employed in professional occupations, two owned their own business and one had just left her husband and had re-entered education and relied on social security. Five women and two men participated and all parents were around 40-45 years of age. Five parents had children at the School who felt marginalised in the student hierarchy whilst only two had children who were located at the top of the social hierarchy. Three parents were reluctant to be interviewed on School grounds: one interview was conducted in the home of the parents, one by phone, and another parents decided to come into the school when it was understood that anonymity and confidentiality was guaranteed. Efforts to interview other parents were not successful. These parents were from disadvantaged or low socio-economic status backgrounds and it may be that differences in cultural capital explain their response. They may have felt that they could not express their views sufficiently in an interview or that their views would be deemed invalid. This explanation connects with work on class and students' and parents' perception of school as alienating and oppressive (Ashenden et al 1980; Reay 2001; 2008). Although the parent interviews are biased towards the middle-class the seven parent interviews still provide another angle on young people's decisions to stay in their education or leave school early in rural areas.

Table 3: Parent respondent details

Parent	Occupation
Mrs. Beckett	Sales worker
Mr. Conrad	Owner-manager
Mrs. Conrad	Owner-manager
Mrs. Grant	Professional
Mrs. Peterson	Professional
Mrs. Prior	Clerical and administrative worker

Mr. Potter	Professional
Mrs. Rice	Owner-manager

Six policy makers were recruited to help shed light on the current thinking behind educational policies aimed at improving educational attainment. People involved with educational policies in the Tasmanian Education Department from a range of management positions across Tasmania were invited to participate in an interview. Four male policy makers and two females were recruited. All policy makers were from Anglo-Saxon backgrounds and aged between early forties and early sixties. The roles of policy makers within the Department of Education are described using the broad terms ‘senior management’ and ‘middle management’ rather than specific terms such as ‘legal services manager’ or ‘secretary’ to protect their identities. Interviews with policy makers especially helped to elucidate the influence of educational policies on the young people’s educational decisions and some of the tensions between the views of teachers and the visions of the policies they worked under. They also provided insights into the areas in which rural educational policy could be improved.

Table 4: Policy maker respondent details

Policy maker	Management level
Mr. Allen	Middle management
Mr. Barnes	Senior management
Mr. Frost	Middle management
Mrs. Gibson	Senior management
Mrs. Maguire	Senior management
Mr. Williams	Senior management

Recruitment

Following the approval of this project from the Human Research Ethics Committee (Tasmania Network) and the Department of Education, a letter explaining the research and asking for permission to conduct the project at Hillsville High was sent to the school principal. When institutional approval of the project was granted an email was sent to the Year 10 teachers at the school, with the permission of the principal, to ask if they were interested in participating and if they would agree to an initial meeting.

Recruitment of students and their parents took place through a self-selecting process. The initial introduction to the project took place through a letter of invitation and an information sheet mailed out by the school to this population. These letters explained why the research was taking place and that it involved the researcher visiting the Year 10 classes, interviews with Year 10 students, their parents and teachers and policy makers. Because of the age of the young participants, both the participant observation and the interviews were subject to written parental consent. A stamped envelope was enclosed in the initial package mailed to students and parents, to be returned if either party was not interested in being involved in the participant observation or in the interview, or both. No observations or conversations related to individuals not involved in the research were included in the field notes.

Teachers were recruited through an initial email and meetings before the commencement of the project. All the Year 10 teachers directly involved with the research agreed to participate in an interview, but teachers were also recruited through a letter of invitation available in the staff room. Some teachers approached me after reading this letter to have a chat to me or accept the invitation to participate in an interview. Policy makers were identified through consultation with informal contacts in the education department, and initially approached by email.

Key concepts

The concept of young people underpins this research project. In this sample a young person is considered a Year 10 student who is aged between 15-16 years. This concept is especially used in the context of the education system which is conceptualised and operationalised as any full-time or part-time education leading to formal qualifications. Because of the opening up of the education system to include a wide array of options to complete Year 12, such as school-based apprenticeships and traineeships, rather than a strict focus on traditional academic studies there is no reason to distinguish between completion of Year 12 and for example an apprenticeship. Education retention is conceptualised as students formally enrolled in Year 10, and early school leaving as those students who are considering leaving school before completion of Year 12.

A number of key concepts and variables relevant to this project emerged from the literature reviewed. The concepts of class, gender and rurality stood out as key influences on education retention and completion, with significant gaps in achievement and Year 12 completion rates

between young people from high and low socio-economic backgrounds, males and females and rural and urban areas (ACARA 2012).

The concept of class was understood not so much as a fixed, social category but rather as what people did with resources and relationships. It was conceptualised and operationalised in terms of Bourdieu's (1990) concept of cultural capital: 'a form of value associated with consumption patterns, lifestyle choices, social attributes and formal qualifications and awards' (Webb et al. 2002: x). Bourdieu's (1990, 1986) concept of social capital, the social networks of individuals and their families, is also integral to the interview schedule and the analysis, as it facilitated the distribution of cultural capital. In the analysis these concepts are sometimes used as one concept as they often interact. Bourdieu (1986) also refers to economic capital, the 'command over economic resources', but because this study focuses on exploring subjectivities and social practices and is less concerned with categorising people the central focus remains on the nature of cultural capital and its relevance for decisions to leave or stay in the education system.

Bourdieu's (1990: 67) concept of the habitus is also integral to the analysis. Bourdieu's attempt to account for 'the internalisation of externality and the externalisation of internality' is a complex account of how the reproduction of social, cultural and economic dispositions is made possible through the habitus (Bourdieu 1990: 72). In this study the habitus is conceptualised as a set of social, cultural and economic dispositions which are inculcated and internalised in the individual through objective structures and manifested and perpetuated in the social practices of the individual. Habitus, then, constitutes the basis for the production of certain practices in individuals through the transmission and internalisation of cultural capital through social capital. Because social practices are the product of the encounter between the habitus and the structures of the social environment of the habitus, manifested and perpetuated by the individual, this concept has the potential to provide significant insights into the young people's everyday world and how it relates to their educational decisions.

Gender was understood as a form of performativity or 'fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means' (Butler 2006: 185). Through gendered performances individuals confirm, produce and reproduce collective understandings of male and female which are often perceived as binary opposites. Gender is conceptualised and operationalised in terms of Connell's (2005) theory of hegemonic masculinity. Connell argues that this idealised form of masculinity to which few men can actually conform ranks at

the top of the gender order in liberal democracies and is associated with characteristics such as heterosexuality, physical strength, power and competitiveness. In contrast, all forms of masculinities that fail to meet the conventions of the dominant form of masculinity, as well as all forms of femininities, are marginalised. The link between this form of masculinity and early school leaving (Connell 1982; Corbett 2007; Frosh et al. 2002; Mac an Ghaill 1994; Walker 1988; Willis 1977) and the suggestion from the literature review that hegemonic masculinity may be especially valued in rural areas makes it a valuable lens through which to investigate young people's subjectivities.

Risk (Beck 1992; Giddens 1991) is used to further make sense of the young people's decision making. Beck's definition of risk (1992: 21) as 'a systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernity itself' indicates the magnitude of the societal transformations associated with globalisation and its importance for human behaviour. Risk in this study was conceptualised as the uncertainties specific to contemporary society such as heightened job insecurity and the declining influence of tradition which means that decisions of all kinds present risks for individuals.

A particular risk for young people living in rural areas in late modernity is the move from rural to urban areas which many must make to continue their education. Simmel's (1950) theory that rural and urban lifestyles generate particular forms of behaviour is employed to help shed light upon the views and beliefs the young rural people have internalised through their rural habitus, and to gain an understanding of the young people's experiences and perceptions of the city. Elucidating these views should help to explain how subjective perceptions of rural and urban lifestyles work to shape young rural people's educational decisions.

Data analysis

Data was analysed using NVivo, a computer assisted qualitative data analysis program (CAQDAS). It was anticipated that the participant observation would generate a large amount of field notes (Jorgensen 1989: 105). It seemed practicable to integrate these notes into one single program and then transcribe, code and analyse them without having to rely on numerous separate folders and files. Being able to manage all data within one program was furthermore considered the most secure way to store a large amount of notes, files and folders.

Using NVivo, a thematic analysis was conducted. First a code, or a node, was assigned to small meaningful segments of text by using NVivo's highlighting and coding tool. Following the developments of these initial codes, categories were identified, categories subsumed into larger categories and core themes developed. Themes and sub-themes were finally amalgamated or subdivided and located within previous research and the theoretical paradigm (Grbich 1999: 234; Van Manen 1997). Throughout the processes of initial coding, categorising and theme development the field notes and interview transcripts were re-read continuously in an open-ended dialogue of fitting and re-fitting data to pre-conceived concepts and emerging categories.

The ease of re-arranging, re-coding and assigning codes to multiple categories without the need for multiple paper copies greatly assisted the coding process. The easy of reorganising codes through this program was especially useful for defining and re-defining hierarchies and categorises. The easy access to the non-hierarchical 'free node' list provided me with almost 'crystallising' insights as it continuously aided the organisation of categories and the development and re-development of themes and sub-themes. NVivo's coding-to-case function also saved time and ensured that memories of observations and insights about individuals were always accurate. With this function all material involving the name of a particular participant, whether direct observation or conversation, was automatically coded to that individual and could be looked up at any time.

Whilst NVivo proved an immensely useful tool for storing and categorising large amounts of data, there were times when a traditional, manual method of analysis was needed. This is perhaps a reflection of the usefulness of CAQDAS for storing and sorting data, but not for conducting the actual analysis (Bogdan and Biklen 2007: 187). For example, when developing major categories, themes or concepts and exploring models and hierarchies I found that using the more spontaneous method of physically writing notes and drawing lines between categories and hierarchies on paper provided a more insightful and creative way of developing the data.

Data analysis commenced at the beginning of the participant observation. Pre-conceived ideas and categories such as Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and Connell's theory of the gender order and hegemonic masculinity were used as 'sensitising concepts' (Blumer 1954); 'those background ideas that inform the overall research problem' (Charmaz 2003: 259) and help the researcher to interpret the data. The organisation of field notes and interview

material on habitus and hegemonic masculinity led to the emergence of the theme of 'leisure' and sub-theme of 'sport', both of which formed part of a localised, rural form of masculinity. Through this reflexive dialogue between the empirical data, 'sensitising concepts' and my own hunches I was sensitised to the particular realities of people in Hillsville, and major themes and concepts were constructed, de-constructed and re-constructed.

Ethical considerations

'Whose side are we on'?

Becker reminds us in his famous essay 'Whose Side Are We On' (1967) that 'when sociologists undertake to study problems that are relevant for the world we live in, they find themselves caught in crossfire'. Fortunately I did not find myself caught too frequently in crossfires due to the careful planning of the project as an unobtrusive one, and my own conscious efforts to remain neutral, unauthoritarian and impartial through the research process. There were, however, times when students or teachers expected me to take sides, or times when the goal of neutrality became an ethical dilemma. These experiences are reminiscent of Becker's further reminder that the question is 'not whether we should take sides, since we inevitably will, but rather whose side are we on'. As the major research instrument and a part of the participants' everyday culture I found myself compelled to reflect upon such questions of partiality and bias during the period of time I spent at Hillsville High. The extract below from the field diary highlights how the ethical and moral challenges that arose during the research were intrinsically bound up with the question of taking sides. The extract is from a formal classroom situation:

Peter is fed up with trying to concentrate on what Mr Marshall is explaining. He starts throwing paper at Karen. Pulling Beverly's hair. Then he gets up and starts walking around. He sees Mr Marshall's bag and grins, then he scans the classroom, at one stage looking directly at me. He knows I can see what he is up to. But I'm no threat. I have no authority. I have no opinion on behavioural issues. Mr Marshall is still writing on the board, explaining the task and unable to see what Peter is doing. Peter pulls Mr Marshall's pencil case out of his bag and looks back at the class, smiling triumphantly. I am starting to panic. What should I do? Trying to stop Peter and loose the trust I have established with him? This doesn't seem to be an option. Neither can I ignore what's happening to Mr Marshall. We have a very good relationship and I know he will feel betrayed if he knew I was witnessing this without interfering. Peter reaches for Mr

Marshall's bag again and it falls over. Mr Marshall turns around and asks Peter to return the pencil case. I feel relieved. Mr Marshall and Peter disappear for a while.

When I began my research I was absolutely on the side of the students. After all, the literature painted a clear picture of enormous disadvantage, rural as well as socio-economic, which meant that the young people in Hillsville experienced immense difficulties negotiating an education system that was firstly based on middle class standards, and secondly drained of resources. Whilst being somewhat aware of the challenges facing the teaching profession in late modernity before embarking on this project, the intense and rather unexpected immersion in the world of teachers and their struggles to keep Hillsville High afloat added a whole new dimension of insight to my understanding of this issue.

The teachers at Hillsville High genuinely liked 'their kids'. They were proud of them when they made progress, disappointed with them when they did not perform their best and excited to attend special events like Year 10 formals with them. Mr Marshall, for example, made a point of 'wiping the slate clean' and entering the classroom with renewed energy and enthusiasm every single day. Many students too said that the teachers were their friends and that they wanted to spend more time with them. A few days after the incident above I observed Peter deeply engaged in conversation with Mr Marshall, asking his advice on a personal matter. Such tensions and conflicts indicating the complexity of the participants and the entanglement of relationships became a major focus area.

The complex dynamics I observed at the school were more than just teachers versus students. There were also differing power dynamics within and between student groups. There were times when members of the quiet girls would turn to me for support when they felt particularly powerless. On one occasion Tina furiously said to a group of cool boys, 'Let's ask her [me]. She will tell you how stupid you are – won't you?', clearly expecting me to make a judgement about the young men's behaviours. Maintaining a neutral appearance was relatively easy when asked direct questions like this one by the students. I would either pretend not to hear the question or shrug my shoulders indecisively. My own responses to the power dynamics playing out in front of me, however, were not that easily shrugged off. As a participant observer deeply immersed in the participants' worlds I felt anguished when Neville from the nerds was tormented and humiliated because of his academic talents and when Susan from the quiet girls was subjected to distressing sexual harassment, and I felt equally upset for the cool boys and wannabes themselves when they revealed their fears and

struggles to me. Understanding these power dynamics, tensions and conflicts between and within individuals became an important way in which to understand the influence of rurality on educational choice.

As I gradually attained an insider's view of the different school cultures and gained some understanding of my own reactions to the tensions within and between these cultures, the story of Hillsville High started to take shape. Paradoxically, whilst being a story full of struggles and conflict, it was also a story of a particular group of human beings who together worked hard towards the outcome of a successful completion of Year 10. These efforts were thwarted by various factors, including the dominance of neoliberal and individualistic policies and processes, ill-suited for encouraging individual members of Hillsville High to achieve their full potential. Whilst I was sometimes faced with particular instances of 'choosing sides' and 'good and bad guys', these isolated occurrences became insignificant as the research progressed and revealed the existence of strong relationships, compromised by the sometimes impossible demands placed on both teachers and students. It is sincerely hoped that my research can contribute to making education more meaningful and empowering for the staff and students whose side I am on.

Working with adolescents

The young age of the participants (15-16 years of age) placed them in a group recognised by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission as vulnerable, as they were under the legal age for many activities. The risk of the young people feeling pressured by or uncomfortable with the research became a key element around which the study was constructed. It was especially important to minimise any power relations between the young people and myself which could be seen to arise from the age difference or the perception that I was in a role of authority. The use of a self-selected sampling strategy reflects these concerns as it conveyed to the students that the study was independent of their school studies and acknowledged the right of all students to self-select out of the study. The information sheet, as well as the initial introduction to the project, made it clear that whether students participated or not would not influence any aspect of their schooling. The decision to let students instigate any interaction or conversation was also made to allow students to make their own decisions about the extent of their participation.

The age of the participants presented a particular challenge because on the one hand they were considered young adults capable of making important decisions such as educational

choices about their futures, but on the other hand they were under the age of formal legal consent for many activities (Fine and Sandstrom 1988: 61). This meant that the autonomy of the young respondents had to be carefully balanced with the need for parental consent for both the participant observation and the interview. To acknowledge the importance of both, the information mailed out to the students and their parents contained separate letters to students and parents and encouraged both parts to discuss the research with each other. It also encouraged them to discuss whether they felt comfortable with the research and whether students would feel comfortable with their parents being interviewed.

Issues of anonymity and confidentiality

Every effort was made to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants. The small rural location had particular characteristics which needed to be disguised and it was of crucial importance to keep the identities of the participants from the town anonymous as social relations in the small town were close and personal information often publicly shared. To protect participant anonymity and confidentiality, any potentially identifying information about the participants, or comments about a teacher or any identifiable person, were collapsed into generalised data or recorded in a way which disguised the person's identity. Potentially identifying material that was not amenable to this treatment was omitted even if it would have contributed to the analysis. All interview material was transcribed using pseudonyms.

Limitations and implications of the research design

A key debate related to case study methodology concerns the generalisability of the case. Yin (2003) suggests that whilst findings from studies drawing on case study methodology might not be generalisable, there is a renewed interest in theory generation in case studies because of the deep understandings such studies provide. While findings from this study will not necessarily be generalisable, they may be useful for theory building. For example, the rich insights into the nature of the young people's life-worlds have provided new understandings into Bourdieu's (1990) concept of the habitus through the findings on the habitus as a site for the intersection of place, gender and class, and the way this plays out in the educational choices of the young participants. The processes and experiences contributing to the social construction of rural masculinities and femininities also contribute to the understanding gender and its implication in choices to leave school or continue on to years 11 and 12.

The myriad of variations within the rural habitus shaped by differences in social and cultural dynamics across rural towns raises the question of how these findings can be used to understand the dynamics underpinning rural retention and completion rates in other rural areas. Across Australia a much higher number of rural young people leave the education system before completion of Year 10. What characterises this group of people is their rural residence and a strong attachment to people and place. The use of the idea of the rural habitus in this particular study has afforded a deeper insight into what it means for young people to live in rural Australia, the strengths and benefits of living in a close-knit community, and the effect of this on early school leaving. It is therefore likely that these findings can be used to help explain how young people in other rural communities make the decision to leave or stay in the education system.

One major critique of participant observation is that only a small number of people can be effectively observed (Grbich 1999). For this reason I attempted to form relationships with the students who expressed a desire to leave school early. This was largely a successful approach, although it was somewhat dependent on gender, as the young females and marginalised young men in the study included me in their friendship groups to a greater extent and at an earlier point in the study than the dominant young males. The young men from the dominant groups developed the view of me as a neutral subject in the classroom early in the research, and later decided to have extensive and personal conversations with me.

Throughout the research process I aimed to follow Bailey's call for qualitative researchers to maintain 'an active consideration of his or her place in the research' (2007: 119). Because of the researchers' deep involvement with their participants in participatory forms of research I made a continuous effort to 'turn on herself' (Angrosino and Rosenberg 2011: 470) to make sure the research was rigorous and any bias limited. The combination of the process of self-reflexivity (Angrosino and Rosenberg 2011) and crystallization (Richardson and Adams St. Pierre 2008) to manage my own subjectivity proved particularly useful in managing subjective reactions and perceptions of events.

Interviews were approached in a similar manner to the field research, with a specific focus on 'turning on myself' to limit bias, and self-reflexivity to make sure questions were asked in an unprejudiced manner. Following Atkinson and Silverman (cited in Fontamne and Frey 1997: 118) I aimed to not 'replace a false god (the authorial monologue of classical sociology) with

another (the monologue of a privileged speaking respondent)'. The aim was not to privilege any particular approach or technique but instead to continue to question.

There is some evidence that my relationship with two young men may have produced a Hawthorne-type effect. These young men had initially decided to leave school early but confided to me in an interview that they now wanted to continue their education.

Unfortunately the lack of longitudinal data means that the actual decisions made by the students are not known by me. Because the research design is not longitudinal it is possible that the decisions differed from the intentions expressed to me.

Some data has been excluded from the study due to issues of anonymity and confidentiality even though it provides valuable insights into the motives and experience behind the participants' views on continuing their education. This has been necessary in order to protect the identity of respondents and where the material is of an especially sensitive nature. To further protect the participants' identities any sources referring directly to Hillsville, such as ABS documents or local sources, have been listed in the reference list but titles have been changed and the URL omitted.

Chapter 4: Hillsville and its characteristics

Introduction

The literature review has discussed some key educational and youth policies and established that they are a major force influencing young people's educational choices. This chapter sets out the context of Hillsville to explore how its history and demographics also shape the lives of its young people.

In this chapter I argue that Hillsville is a divided community. On the one hand it is a traditional rural community characterised by a high level of social cohesion and a strong presence of the primary industries. On the other hand the impact of globalisation has worked to weaken the local labour market, reduced opportunities for secure and permanent employment and produced new fault lines. The analysis of the town's isolated location and infrastructure supports the argument presented in the literature review that geographic isolation and its role in generating a particular culture can complicate access to post-compulsory education.

The journey to Hillsville

The journey to Hillsville is a journey through a beautiful and dramatically changing landscape. Having passed through a major regional town and several smaller villages with stunning sea views, lush crops and green paddocks, the highway passes through a mountain range which provides a natural boundary between Hillsville and other parts of Tasmania. The rain and the mist which often form as a result of the mountains reinforce the physical image of a boundary. From a distance the fog and clouds can appear like a heavy grey curtain; a stark contrast to the idyllic countryside and open sea views just encountered. Once entered into, the greyness creates a sense of disorientation which slowly fades away as the views of lush rainforest, rivers and pristine beaches on the other side reveal themselves to the traveller (field notes).

As the journey continues the landscape transforms away from breathtaking sea views and open fields of varying crops to an inland landscape of more closely fenced grass paddocks. As Hillsville is approached, the scenery turns noticeably more industrial, with the aluminum smelter, the grain processing plant and other factories marking the entrance to the town. It does not take long to drive through the small main street of Hillsville with its few shops,

banks, grocer, bakery and hairdressers. Several schools and sporting facilities, a medical centre, a community and recreation centre, and several pubs and clubs are scattered around the town.

The transition from industrial to post-industrial economy in Tasmania

For the first 70 years of European settlement the Tasmanian economy was almost entirely based on agriculture and forestry. The discovery of minerals and tin mines in the early 1800s lifted Tasmania from its rural-based economy to a state with major industries, including abattoirs, dairy factories, fish processing factories, vegetable processing factories, grain processing plants, saw mills, pulp and paper mills, textile mills and mineral concentration mills. More recent changes to the economy have been driven by globalisation, market restructuring and deregulation. This includes the speeding up of communication through the development of internet-related communication technologies, allowing businesses and capital to spread globally (Gray and Lawrence 2001). Corporations have become multinational, moving their operations to places where they can enhance their financial conditions and profitability; this has created a global trading environment and global competition.

Associated with this transformation of the economy are the flight of capital to nations with cheap labour power and the decline of first world manufacturing industries, with the rural sector especially hard hit (Flora and Flora 2004; McMichael and Lawrence 2001). This has created pressure on governments to deregulate the economy, with economic rationalism promoting the reduction of government intervention in the economy, privatisation and deregulation (Harvey 2005).

The impact of the transition from an industrial economy to a post-industrial one in Tasmania is particularly evidenced in the reduction of a number of major employers over the last 40 years or so. Calculated as a share of the state's economic output, the greatest reductions have been in mining and manufacturing and the greatest growth in the service sector, including health care and social assistance (Economic Policy Branch 2013). Tourism has also steadily grown over the past decade, with just over one million visitors in 2014 (Tourism Tasmania 2014). The continuing growth of the service sector and the decline of the manufacturing sector affect Tasmania's communities greatly through the closure of businesses and loss of jobs.

Whilst for many rural communities the result of globalisation and economic rationalism has been a lack of control over what happens to them economically, the effects of globalisation

are contradictory: the closure of businesses because of increased global competition is a negative effect, whereas the opportunities for expansion of businesses or manufacturing created by a rural economy (Flora and Flora 2004) are positive. The broader regional area in which Hillsville is located represents a microcosm of this general pattern, with bed and breakfast accommodation, boutiques and restaurants emerging in certain parts of the area that are particularly picturesque or have historical attractions. This increase in tourism is not evident in Hillsville's economy, which remains centred on the primary industries to a greater extent than the state and national average (ABS 2013b). For example, many of the town's residents are employed in the local abattoir, aluminium smelter and vegetable processing plant. However, a number of businesses have recently closed down in Hillsville. This uneven development, where some areas remain stuck in an industrial past in which opportunities for work are becoming increasingly volatile, while other areas are able to look towards the service industries of the future, highlights the importance of risk in a globalised world (Beck 1992; Giddens 1991). Particular risks exist in rural areas like Hillsville because of its reliance on a rural-based economy, including its associated processing and manufacturing opportunities which are increasingly being outsourced to more competitive markets.

Infrastructure and amenities

The risk associated with the reduction of traditional youth pathways because of the decline in opportunities for work in the primary industries and manufacturing is just one of the risks associated with the transition to a post-industrial society. This risk of unemployment is increased for Hillsville's young people because of their limited access to post-secondary education. In addition, Hillsville's isolated location means that the community is affected in particular ways by globalisation and economic restructuring which creates a number of other risks.

Hillsville's isolated location is exacerbated in the community's limited access to public transport. Hillsville's high rates of car ownership reflect the limited public transport (i.e. bus and train) infrastructure in rural Tasmania in general (ABS 2013a). Although car ownership rates are high, this may also involve an element of geographic immobility for a section of the population because of the increasing cost of fuel and car maintenance associated with longer trips, and the low wages paid to labourers. Limited telecommunications is another factor exacerbating Hillsville's isolated location. Although Hillsville itself has access to fast broadband Internet and mobile services, the areas surrounding Hillsville do not. Indeed, data

indicates that Hillsville has lower rates of Internet use at home and at work than many other Tasmanian towns (Skills Tasmania 2008; ABS 2013a). This, together with the lack of public transport and the relatively low movement of traffic out of the area, highlights how social and economic life in geographically isolated areas like Hillsville is highly dependable on reliable and affordable telecommunications. Ironically, because of their small and dispersed populations, these areas are the most likely to miss out on the technological developments that can potentially network them into the global community.

Hillsville's isolated location also means that access to a variety of leisure and recreational activities and institutions is limited. Whilst sports aficionados are well catered for in Hillsville, there is an absence of those other organised leisure activities such as drama and music which are often offered to young people in larger towns and cities. A smaller proportion of the town's residents identify as having no religion as compared to the state and national average, and most people identify with traditional institutionalised religions such as Anglican, Christian and Uniting Church (ABS 2013b).

Hillsville's education facilities consist of a government primary and high school, and a Christian school catering for primary and secondary students. Additional primary schools are located throughout the area and in the smaller townships. A slightly higher percentage of students attend the local government high school in Hillsville as compared to the state and national average for government school attendance, and a lower percentage attend the local Christian school, reflecting the high number of labourers on relatively low incomes (ABS 2013 a and b). A much higher percentage of students attend other secondary non-government forms of schools than in the broader region and Tasmania as a whole (ABS 2013b), indicating the existence of a middle class that is able to send their children to boarding schools. Hillsville High School offers a small range of years 11 and 12 subjects, but in general a transfer to the nearest regional college is needed to complete years 11 and 12.

Limited access to health services in Hillsville is similarly grounded in geographic isolation and small population numbers. There are fewer general practitioners listed in the town per full-time employee than other communities with similar population numbers. Whilst the town does have some extended medical services and outreach programs, most health issues that cannot be dealt with by a GP require a long trip to the nearest regional hospital (Tasmania Medicare Local 2012). If a trip to the nearest regional hospital in one's privately owned

vehicle is considered unfeasible because of the costs associated with it, options include catching the school bus with only one early morning departure and late afternoon return.

Economic indicators

Hillsville's labour force reflects the continuing opportunities for employment in the primary industries in some rural areas, with close to 40 per cent of its population employed in the primary industries compared to a state average of 14.8 per cent, an Australian regional average of 19.4 per cent and an Australian average of 13.3 per cent (ABS 2013a; ABS 2013b; ABS 2013c). Just over 15 per cent of Hillsville's population is employed in education and training, health care and social assistance compared to a state average of 21 per cent and a national average of 19.6 per cent (ABS 2013a; ABS 2013b).

The ongoing opportunities for unskilled manual work in the primary industries in Hillsville are reflected in the educational skills and qualifications of the town's workforce, which is generally lower qualified than the state as a whole. For example, it has been found that Hillsville has a higher proportion of people with no post-school qualifications, a higher proportion of employed people with trade qualifications and a lower proportion of employed university graduates compared to the rest of Tasmania (Skills Tasmania 2008).

Hillsville has a low unemployment rate of 4.7 per cent compared to 6.4 per cent Tasmania-wide and 5.3 per cent nationally in 2013 (ABS 2013a; ABS 2013b; ABS 2013c), but the region in which Hillsville is located has been identified as an area with high levels of youth unemployment. The youth unemployment rate is well above the national average of 12.2 per cent (ABS 2014 a and b; Brotherhood of St Laurence 2014), more than double the rate of overall unemployment in Australia. The difficulties associated with finding employment for young people is reflected in the higher percentage of young people aged 15-24 years in Hillsville not fully engaged in education, training and work compared to the broader region and Tasmania as a whole (ABS 2013a, b and c). This indicates that geographically isolated areas are amongst the areas most severely impacted by the decline of the primary industries and traditional post-school pathways because of their limited access to alternative pathways. These observations suggest that Hillsville's labour market is strongly age segregated, with a high proportion of young people unemployed and looking for work, placing them at risk of being locked out of the labour market and jeopardising their future economic success.

The domination of the primary industries also makes gender a key factor shaping Hillsville's labour market. The gender division of labour is striking, with males over-represented in the primary industries and manufacturing as well as in the trades and as technicians, and females over-represented as community and clerical services and sales workers. Across all age groups males are more likely to be employed as managers and females as professionals (ABS 2014 a and b; Labour Economics Office 2008). More than twice the number of males are employed full-time compared to females in Hillsville, whilst the opposite is the case for part-time work, with more than twice the number of females employed part-time compared to males. Reflecting Hillsville's higher percentage of people not in the labour force, more females are not in the labour force in comparison with many other similar Tasmanian towns and Tasmania as a whole (Labour Economics Office 2008), and more females are unemployed compared to males. Although these patterns resemble a broader Tasmanian and national pattern (ABS 2013c), they are more exacerbated and indicate the existence of a highly gender-segregated labour market.

Hillsville has a high percentage of indigenous people residing in the area (2013a). Considering that the national unemployment rate for Indigenous Australians is almost three times that of non-Indigenous people and the participation rate almost half that of non-Indigenous people (ABS 2011b), this group of people is likely to influence the dynamics of the local labour market. In particular, the high percentage of Indigenous people residing in Hillsville may partly explain the lower labour force participation in Hillsville and the high level of youth unemployment.

The presence of national and international companies account for the majority of the opportunities for manual work in Hillsville's primary industries, but the area also hosts a small middle class owning small and larger businesses (ABS 2013a). In particular, the area has a significant number of smaller owner-occupied farms that provide opportunities for unskilled work for the local population (Hillsville Council 2008). The differences between Hillsville's labour force, Tasmania and the mainland demonstrate how it has been possible for Hillsville to maintain its focus on the primary industries and its associated activities such as manufacturing in a globalised world because of its geographic location and natural resources. However, the higher proportion of people working in health care and social assistance compared to the broader region may indicate a growing level of disadvantage as the area's primary industries continue to weaken. In addition, This, together with the under-representation of areas that are central to a post-industrial economy, such as education,

training and health care, indicates the increasing effect of globalisation and economic restructuring on some parts of the community.

Class and life chances in Hillsville

Hillsville is characterised by a relatively high level of disadvantage. Measured by the SEIFA index, Hillsville is consistently listed as disadvantaged according to a number of social-economic and educational characteristics employed by the SEIFA index (ABS 2008).

Hillsville's low SEIFA ranking is illustrated in a number of socio-economic factors.

The educational qualifications of Hillsville's residents speak of a community in which a high number of people are significantly disadvantaged. The Year 12 attainment of Hillsville's 15-34 year-olds is low, and the high rate of labourers compared to other occupations (ABS 2013a and b) points to a community in which education is less valued or attainable than in other parts of Tasmania and Australia. The relatively low level of education in Hillsville is linked to the number of people living on low incomes, with low median weekly family incomes and high levels of income support unemployment allowance and disability support allowance compared to both the Tasmanian and state averages (ABS 2013b).

The vulnerability of small rural communities to the impacts of globalisation and economic restructuring is furthermore evident in Hillsville's housing market. Fewer people in Hillsville own their house outright than in Tasmania on a whole and more people own their house with a mortgage than the Tasmanian and Australian average (ABS 2013b), reflecting the lower education and income levels amongst the town's residents. A high proportion of dwellings were rented from the state housing authority in Hillsville compared to the rest of Tasmania and Australia (Public Health Information Unit 2005).

These data corroborate the picture of Hillsville as a community with significant levels of social disadvantage. The area's health indicators are also poor. Hillsville's high rates of avoidable mortality rate of ischemic heart disease, cardiovascular disease and lung cancer are partly testament to the high use of fertilizers and agricultural chemicals and sprays in the area but they also reflect a low income environment associated with a diet high in processed foods and low in fruits and vegetables (Tasmania Medicare Local 2012). Hillsville has high rates of particular risky behaviours, especially smoking and high risk, short-term harm from alcohol use and risky driving behaviours (Tasmania Medicare Local 2012; Hillsville Council 2014). There are high rates of chronic disease management services per full-time employee per

general practitioner in Hillsville and high rates of mental health treatment consultations are reflective of the high rates of avoidable mortality rate of ischemic heart disease, cardiovascular disease and lung cancer and the existence of chronic disease (Tasmania Medicare Local 2012).

Hillsville's Indigenous population consistently fares worse than its non-Indigenous population on most indicators. The median age is much lower for Hillsville's Indigenous population than for its Anglo-Saxon population at 23 years old compared to 38 years old, indicating the complex health issues experienced by this group and their lower life chances. Consistent with Tasmanian and national averages Indigenous people have higher unemployment rates, lower labour force participation rates and less access to the internet than the region's non-Indigenous people (Skills Tasmania 2008). Whilst these indicators highlight the disadvantage experienced by Australia's Indigenous people across the nation, the highly dominant Anglo-Saxon culture in Hillsville may intensify ethnocentrism in the community and exacerbate experiences of disadvantage by the Indigenous population in this rural town.

Social cohesion and division in Hillsville

This discussion highlights the interplay between the residents of Hillsville and their geographic context. In many ways Hillsville is a community characterised by low income similar to other Australian communities, with low socio-economic status linked to particular health, housing and education indicators. However, Hillsville's location in a particular part of rural Australia shapes its social, cultural and economic life in contradictory and unpredictable ways which differ from urban communities with similar characteristics.

Hillsville's isolated location can be linked with social cohesion and homogeneity through the dominance of manual labour and particular forms of leisure in the community. The nature of work, the strengths of the primary industries and the high percentage of unskilled labourers indicate a high degree of shared experiences of labour. The nature of leisure with its emphasis on sport creates a focus on physicality that connects with the importance of manual work in the area. The evidence of social cohesion in Hillsville is contrasted by a degree of exclusion from forms of work and leisure reflective of a post-industrial society, which is exacerbated by the town's distance away from larger towns and their associated employment and leisure opportunities.

The discussion also highlights how experiences of life in Hillsville vary according to class, age and ethnicity through their link with social mobility. Whilst the literature has identified a large group of low income, unskilled labourers in the community, the high incomes of other community members links with the high proportion of children and young people attending boarding schools as one way for wealthier families to compensate for a range of services not available in Hillsville. The high rates of drink driving and alcohol use indicate that community members with low levels of social mobility are vulnerable to engagement in risky behaviours and activities.

Chapter 5: Life in Hillsville

Hillsville is the sort of place where you can't scratch your backside without the next door neighbour finding out (Maggie).

Introduction

In this chapter I begin the data analysis. I particularly focus on illuminating the young people's subjective experiences of their lives in Hillsville. Bourdieu's (1990) notions of social and cultural capital and the habitus, Simmel's (1950) theory of the modern metropolis and Connell's (2005) theory of the gender order are employed to assist the analysis. The intersection of social forces such as class, gender and rurality through the habitus and their manifestation in social practices allow for a careful examination of the processes, practices and dispositions that underpin the young people's experiences.

I argue that the intersection between class, gender and a particular rural area shapes the young people's habitus and its features. The characteristics of the rural habitus include: a high level of social capital through knowledge of and close relationships with other community members; a cultural capital centred on physicality; embeddedness in nature through interaction with the natural environment and its inhabitants; a belief in self-sufficiency; and identification with particular forms of masculinities and femininities. I also highlight that whilst the young participants shared many aspects of the rural habitus, their responses to life in Hillsville differed according to the nature of their social networks and cultural knowledges.

Experiences of security and risk in a small rural community

Similar to findings from studies of other rural places in Australia, the young people in this study expressed deep appreciation of their small community and their strong bonds with other community members (Bourke and Geldens 2007; Leyshon 2008; Wierenga 2009; Wyn 1998). All the young people in this study described Hillsville as a relaxed little town free from the hustle and bustle of the city. This description of Hillsville included the perception of the town as inclusive and friendly. The young people consistently spoke of walking up the street and 'knowing everyone' as one of the best things about their town. They appreciated that nearby there 'is always someone to talk to', 'always someone who cares'. These descriptions of the importance of intimate and informal relationships in maintaining social

coherence and inclusiveness point to a community characterised by *gemeinschaft* qualities (Toennies 1957).

It was of utmost importance for all of the participants to express how the close-knit relations in the town were imbued with a sense of moral obligation to other community members. The participants frequently referred to a recent fatal accident involving numerous community members as an example of rural social capital as a resource and a form of resilience in the face of disaster. One young person, Trudy, describes how ‘everyone was upset...that accident happened...my aunty and cousin was involved. We all came really close because of that accident’. Trudy here explains how most people in the town were impacted by the accident by their knowledge of and relationships with other individuals in the area. One teacher, Ms Willis, echoed Trudy’s thoughts and explained how the accident ‘had made the school band together’, and that ‘people’s kindness and consideration of each other’ had ‘filtered right through the whole community’ in a way that she considered unlikely to occur in bigger towns. The story of the accident highlights how the strong sense of familiarity with other people in the community worked to generate feelings of trust and solidarity with the town, strengthening the sense of attachment and belonging to the community. The acute knowledge of other community members meant that most people’s personal response to the accident activated individual and social resources such as emotional and social support, reinforcing the perceptions of the community as characterised by *gemeinschaft*.

The perception of Hillsville as a friendly and supportive place included an egalitarian attitude that cut across age. The finding that closer family ties exist amongst rural youth compared to urban youth (Looker and Dwyer 1997) is reflected in the appreciation of Hillsville’s young people to ‘always have [having] someone to talk to’ and ‘someone I know around’. This sense of unity in the community was also associated with a degree of breakdown of the social expectations and behaviours commonly linked to different life stages. One teacher, Mr Marshall, explains how he appreciates the cohesion and friendliness of the community, but also how it can be problematic:

You want to be friends with them, but there is a boundary too. A lot of kids just don’t understand that. We have had parties at some of the teachers’ houses and I’ve had Grade 8 kids turning up, knocking on the door and saying ‘why can’t I come in? Give us a beer’ and it’s 3am in the morning and you’re going ‘you’re 14 years old. How come you’re out in the street and you’re trying to get into an adult function?’. And it’s

not just once, it's happened on a number of occasions. These kids don't seem to understand the boundary between the professional and personal. I think that social functions here like parties blur the boundaries.

Mr. Marshall here describes how he sometimes finds his personal and professional life compromised by what he perceives as a lack of understanding of age-specific behaviour. The differences in these understandings of personal boundaries can be linked with the *gemeinschaft* characteristics of Hillsville, and the closed social universe and the homogeneity of the community were especially linked with a form of age egalitarianism.

Despite the high value placed on social capital in Hillsville, the young people themselves also experienced close social relationships as having a downside. Stanley and Neville point to this in their comment that 'there is always someone you can ask for help...well I guess there's also the chance that you'll run into someone you don't really like...'. This comment reflects the standard comment 'everyone knows my name here' which all the young participants, rolling their eyes and sighing, nominated as one of the negative aspects of living in a small rural town. In their conversation below, Wendy and Susan sum up the common theme of how this oppressive quality of social capital was linked to difficulties in expressing one's individuality:

Wendy: You couldn't wear outgoing stuff like different clothes.

Susan: Pink tights or something like that...you wouldn't wear that in Hillsville. People would say 'hmmm look what she's wearing'

Wendy: Then you would end up not feeling good about wearing them and they would gossip.

Susan: It's a very gossipy sort of a place. A lot of people are related and it's not a very big place. If you get a reputation it usually sticks, even if it's not true

For the young people in Hillsville social capital worked as a form of social control and was associated with social surveillance and conformity (Leyshon 2008; Tucker 2003; Tucker and Matthews 2001). In particular, the tendency for personal affairs to become public rather than private in Hillsville had the potential to be socially intrusive and limit the young people's identity development and self-expression.

For many young women social control was perceived as an expectation to conform to particular requirements for modesty, which they experienced as a need to mask their sexuality and make their bodies invisible. Although the oppressive qualities of social capital is mirrored in other studies of rural youth (Haugen and Villa 2006; Leyshon 2008; Tucker 2003; ; Wierenga 2009), in some instances social intrusion in Hillsville was so invasive that it threatened some young people's health and wellbeing due to the stigmatisation and social isolation it could cause. Rose, for example, spoke of being acutely aware of her actions and behaviours because of an incident with a young man. She recounts that when she 'arrived home from school mum and dad had phone calls from everyone in the hour it took me to get home and they knew what happened'. For some individuals like Rose such experiences resulted in constant self-monitoring which tended to be associated with anxiety and social withdrawal. This finding confirms other research on the experiences of rural young people which suggests that girls are more likely to be subjected to social surveillance by members of the community (Tucker and Matthews 2001; Dunkley 2004). However, aAlthough social control in Hillsville was gendered, the high level of social control in in the town was an experience shared by both young men and women which gave a particular dimension to the way risk operated in their lives.

Experiences of social control were described as intensified because of Hillsville's geographic isolation, and this meant there were limited ways in which to escape the restrictions placed on social life. The young people saw Hillsville as a place cut off from the opportunities for excitement and entertainment in the city. Almost every participant spoke of having 'nothing to do, nowhere to go' and being excluded from activities such as 'going to the cinema' or 'having a place to hang out'. Views on the city as providing opportunities not available in rural towns are common in other rural youth studies (Leyshon 2008; Looker and Dwyer 1997; Wierenga 2009; Wyn et al. 1998), but this study qualifies this view through the observation that despite the common agreement that Hillsville lacked many of the desirable features of the city and was a 'boring' place, most of the participants had only limited experience of major population centres. Only four out of the 33 young people who participated in an interview reported frequently visiting larger towns or cities and participating in city life with their friends or relatives. Whilst many participants regularly visited larger towns or cities for shopping or going to the cinema, this did not always result in meaningful interaction with city life or city people.

Relationship to country: Experiences of embeddedness and embodiment

The young people's experiences of their lives in Hillsville were especially characterised by a high degree of embeddedness in Hillsville's rural landscape. The following extract from a field trip with a group of year 8, 9 and 10 students to a local business illustrates how the participants' relationship to the land on which they lived is mediated by their social capital:

As we drive further out of town Ben says 'my aunty lives down that road to the left'. The driver must have thought that Ben told him to turn left but all the students yell out 'No, keep going'. The driver then slows down to turn left at the following road and the students tell him 'go straight ahead and we will get to the gates'. Anne and Anita say to me 'that's Nina's house and Nina's car is parked there outside her house. And that's Mrs Pearson's house over there'. Bob then catches my attention and points to another small gravel road at the end of which his uncle and aunt live, and Trent tells me that his sister lives in another house we just passed. Someone points out his mother's old house and someone else tells me the house to the left used to be the old shop when his grandmother was alive. I have already lost track of whose relatives and friends live where (field notes).

The young people's close relationship to their local area is here demonstrated by the very fact that they seem to be better at finding their way around the countryside than the bus driver. Unlike the driver who is trying to navigate the area with the use of maps and street names, the young people can read the rural landscape. Their ability to name the countryside testifies to their celebration of a deep sense of belonging and connectedness to the area through their contact with the natural environment.

This sense of connectedness was mediated by their social relationships. Close personal relationships were essential to the young people's health and wellbeing, but so was the notion of 'having space around you'. The general benefits of interaction with the natural environment for human wellbeing have been thoroughly documented (Angelo and Jerolmack 2012; Noddings 2006; Mayer et al. 2009), but for the young people in Hillsville interaction with the non-human world was essential for their sense of self. Sarah deliberates that 'it's good here, it's country, rural...you can walk around in your undies and no one cares' and Robert asserts that 'it is good having no one looking over your fence...you can kick back...walk around naked and catch bugs if that's what you like'. Rose also makes a

distinction between the physical space of the countryside surrounding Hillsville and the social space of the town of Hillsville itself in her comment that she would:

...rather live in the country than in town. I come into town and there's neighbours close by and all this noise all the time...cars. I'd just rather be out where you can have privacy and people are not looking at you all the time. Wear pink trousers and everyone gossips in town, but you can go round in your undies and no one blinks out here.

Connecting these accounts of life in the country is the ambiguous feeling of space as being simultaneously a source of freedom and control. The association between space and restrictions on behaviours in Hillsville indicates the young people's acute awareness of the particular form of social organisation operating in Hillsville. In contrast, the perception of a more authentic and unrestricted lifestyle outside town was not only attributed to the lack of interaction with other community members but also the interaction with the natural environment.

Like other young people in rural Australia (Wierenga 2009), most of the participants in this study expressed an appreciation of living in a natural environment which provided rich access to resources such as food, water, open space and fresh air, and they saw this as essential for their health and wellbeing. However, the young people's accounts of their connection to the natural habitat revealed that it was not just based on sustenance but was integral to their rural habitus and was associated with embodied experiences of rural life. Anna, Anita and Nina explain their love of the local area in their descriptions of their childhood experiences of 'swimming in the river', 'motorbike racing over the paddocks' and 'playing in the dam at Anita's place'. Anita adds that 'I always remember dad standing there with me, lifting me up so I could see everything over the dam and further on up over the hills on our place. I know it so well now but I used to think it was huge when I was little'. Nigel's descriptions of his rally track where he and his friends often race their bikes reveal a similar connection with the land. Nigel explains that 'I cut down the trees myself [for the rally track] and found the best way through the bush. I go around the paddocks at home and then into the track'. These young people claim a relationship to the land through their experiences in the natural environment. Life habitually lived in Hillsville is a life bound up with nature. This happens in subtle ways, such as the daily ride on the school bus through the green hills and rainforest or through planned activities such as camping, bushwalking or having barbeques. The deep immersion in nature brings about physical and visual experiences associated with an authentic lifestyle

which demands immediate attention to sensory experiences and brings a certain degree of slowness to life.

For many young people their immersion in nature was also closely linked with their relationships with other living creatures, and these experiences were often heavily gendered. For some young women like Rose, who lived on a farm, this mainly meant relationships with farm animals: ‘the other day I had reared a little lamb and it was born premature and it was real little. Then we were selling the lambs and I said NO. She’s still at home. I can probably get her pregnant this year so I can keep her for even longer’. For other young women the care for animals extended to wildlife. This passage observing a visit to Anita’s family farm describes Anita’s and her family’s love of the land:

Anita brings out her baby wallaby. She is caring for it because it lost its mother. Anita’s aunt went out to shoot wallabies one night because they were eating the grass on the farm and she checked its pouch and found a baby. Anita says she always does that if she shoots a female wallaby. She brought it to Anita to care for. Mr Conrad winks at his daughter and shakes his head: ‘Wallabies eat the grass and Anita keeps on making them into pets’. Mrs Conrad laughs and says that he can’t deny that they are cute.

The nurture and responsibility Rose and Anita display in their care for animals is an action specific to their rural context. For both Rose and Anita interaction with animals is part of their everyday world and something they feel cannot be replicated in cities or towns. Their stories indicate that they associate this form of interaction with a sense of security and familiarity, yet these activities are also bound up with the risk that these relationships may be terminated at any time if they hinder the farm’s production. The young women deal with this ambiguity by doing anything in their powers to make the animals appear a non-threat or increase their production. Through these actions they express their conformity to key aspects of the rural habitus such as self-reliance in their support for the family business, and reinforce their sense of femininity through their nurturing and supporting roles within the family (Bryant 1999; Connell 2005).

For young males relationships with the land were especially shaped by their interaction with the natural environment as a source of food. In harvesting these food sources they shared the

responsibility towards the natural world and its inhabitants that was also displayed by the young women:

In the weekend I went with my cousin to another relative's place. We had these guns and they are really powerful so when I fired the first shot I wasn't prepared so it went off and went right back at my shoulder. That's why I'm so sore in the shoulder today. We didn't get much sleep, but we shot two ducks and four wallabies, some for ourselves and two for the dogs. We only shoot what we can eat and take with us.

Paul's account of his shooting trip repeats the theme of care and responsibility for the wilderness through his emphasis on shooting only what he can eat and take with him. This was a key theme for the young men engaged in hunting activities, including Nigel who 'will go and shoot rabbits and cook them for tea if I don't know what else to do after school'. These accounts confirm the importance for young men of gaining skills particular to their rural context, including manual labour and strong relationships to modern technologies such as cars, tractors, farming equipment and guns (Liepins 2000; Peters 2000). For these young men, having the physical strength and precision skills to hold and fire a rifle was of outmost importance to their sense of masculinity.

The highly gendered nature of the young men and women's experiences with nature confirms the existence of strong traditional gender roles in rural communities (Bourke 2001; Bourke and Geldens 2007; Dunkley 2004; Tucker 2003; Tucker and Matthews 2001). Wierenga (2009); the deeply embedded and embodied aspect of their interactions with nature and non-humans suggests that these interactions are central to their sense of self (Little 2002 a and b). The young people's contributions to their families through these activities furthermore suggests the continuing importance of aspects of traditional agrarian ideology in Hillsville (Gray and Lawrence 2001), especially self-reliance.

Views on the city

The young people's experiences of Hillsville included the experience of Hillsville as a place of exclusion from the excitement and entertainment opportunities of the city. Similar to young people in other rural communities, almost all of the participants spoke of 'nothing to do, nowhere to go' and their exclusion from activities such as going to the cinema, opportunities for shopping and dining or simply having a place to hang out after school (Wyn

et al. 1998; Wierenga 2009; White 1999). The young participants therefore expressed an ambiguous relationship to the town, embracing its strengths, yet deriding its weaknesses.

For some participants who were more familiar with city life, the city as a space offering a wide range of activities and events co-existed with the perception of the city as a place where personal freedom could be obtained. Susan, Rose and Trudy, for example, explained that they feel more 'comfortable and confident' in the bigger towns nearby, and even more so in Sydney because they feel less concerned about what people might think of their behaviour. The theme of feeling more free and confident in the city than in Hillsville because of an increased degree of personal autonomy and freedom from social surveillance was especially marked for the young women in this study, indicating the gendered nature of social control.

Despite the common perception of Hillsville as lacking significant opportunities for leisure, the dominant perception of the city was that the cityscape was unfamiliar (Wierenga 2009). This perception of the city was linked to the young participants' deep immersion in the local area. Maggie's comment that 'I like it here because it's not a big place, we all sort of stay in the area, we don't really move off or branch out. It's the sort of place when we finish high school we'll probably all still know each other and keep in contact and that's just a lot easier' suggests that a sense of stability associated with the permanence of social relations is central to the young people's sense of self. Nigel confirms the perception of rural life as easier in his comment that 'I drove when I was 12 and many people in the city think it's hard to drive. It's hard work living in the city I reckon'. This construction of rural life as 'easy' and the city as 'hard work' points to the continuing persistence of the rural-urban divide which has previously been expressed in contrasting findings such as the city as a place of desire and young rural people's dislike of the problems of the city (Looker and Dwyer 1997).

One key difference between rural and city life discussed throughout the conversations with the participants was the appreciation of the low population density in rural areas. Mr Potter's reflection on the importance of space for his and his family's wellbeing expands the previous discussion of the young people's views on the city and the country:

I don't suppose I spend enough time out of this area. I'm from this town but my parents' sisters and brothers had farms and I have always spent time there. And my wife, her family originally came from a farm too. I think it's great to be able to do that but then again I never had any great attraction for the big cities. They're nice to visit, I like going to the cities, but it took a long time to convert me, but then at some stage I

decided I liked it. I just wasn't used to people around me and I think I've passed it on to my kids. I just love all the space and I'm not good in big crowds and that's been passed on to my eldest daughter and she gets a bit claustrophobic, well I guess it's the fear of crowds really. Here we have the tight knit community. There are strong family ties, great opportunities to build friendships with your neighbours, you know them all and the few times I have been in some of the larger towns nearby you can tell that people just don't know their neighbours.

Mr. Potter's comments elucidate the contrast between high social connectedness in low population density areas and low social connectedness in high population density areas. This *gemeinschaft-gesellschaft* distinction was difficult for many participants to negotiate, with many respondents describing the city as having a hazy, maze-like quality, expressed in both physical, social and cultural terms, in contrast to the rural landscape that they could readily read and understand. Mr. Potter furthermore highlights the intergenerational aspect of transmitting rural and urban views through family and community social capital.

The theme of feeling out of place with the practices of the city often co-existed with the theme of the city as a site of immorality where moral obligations to fellow citizens were suspended. Mrs Beckett, in recounting her recent trip to the city, describes city people as behaving unethically:

In the city people could be laying in the street and people just walk by and don't want to know or intervene. Like we were walking and there was a guy just huddled up on the ground and I said to my husband 'shouldn't someone get a rug?' and people in the city just keep walking and here I'd expect someone to look after someone else. It just comes back to small communities where everybody looks after one another and in tragic situations everybody is always there for everybody (Mrs Beckett).

Amongst the young participants and their parents there was a perception that the city was a place of danger and immorality where people were uncaring and untrustworthy. This foreignness of the world beyond Hillsville constituted a very different form of risk compared to the risk of social control and surveillance in the young people's local community, and this ambiguity worked to heighten the feelings of risk in their lives.

The young people's feelings of alienation from the area beyond Hillsville were also influenced by processes of labelling and stigmatisation. Anne and Anita explain below how

the young people in Hillsville shared a stigmatised identity caused by labelling from outsiders:

Anne: Sometimes you sort of think...people up there think 'oh you live in Hicksville'. But tell them you live in Beachside and they like you.

Anita: Yeah it's like 'Hillsville hmm [dull tone of voice] and "Beachside [local town] oh okay' [cheerful tone of voice] just because of the ocean and surfing and that, I think.

Anne: And if you say you live in Summersville [another local town] then people go 'Oh my god, beautiful historic Summersville'.

MS: Why do you think they do that?

Anita: Oh it's just such a hole... Nothing to do....they probably think everyone lives in the Ghetto [girls laughing]...

Anne: And they say we say 'Hicksville'. My sister lives in a boarding house and they will say all the time 'oh my god Hicksi'.

MS: What do you think about that?

Anne: Oh they're just making fun of Hillsville...don't know.

Anita: I don't care. I'm proud to live in Hillsville. It's better than half the places up there.

Anne: Yeah I wouldn't live up there. I couldn't live in Springfield [nearest regional town] it's really dirty, too many scummies.

Anne: And the bigger towns further away are too busy. After one day in the city shopping I feel really stressed out and uncomfortable.

This conversation illustrates how the geographic location of the young people shaped their interactions with people outside their local area, and how the stigmatisation attached to living in Hillsville affected the young peoples' self-image. Anne's and Anita's story sum up how most of the young people experienced being labelled as inferior ('Oh it's just such a hole...nothing to do....they probably think everyone lives in the Ghetto). However, the shared response of the town's young people to being ridiculed was not only feelings of inferiority but also a strong attachment to the area, which included the perception of the area

as safe and superior to the outside world ('I don't care. I'm proud to live in Hillsville. It's better than half the places down there'). Processes of stigmatisation and labelling were therefore mutual, which was also demonstrated above in the young people's view on 'unsafe' city people.

The role of geographic location in generating particular social characteristics and shaping the young people's relationship with the city was also a recurrent theme amongst teachers. There was a strong understanding amongst teachers that there was a difference between the characteristics of the young people in Hillsville and young people in more urbanised areas.

Mr Fielding explains that:

Rural kids appear to be noisy, but it's not being rude, they're loud, not rude...that's just the way they are. You peel away that layer and you talk to the individual underneath and you realize that they are very sincere, honest, trusting. I think this is different from kids in urban areas. I've found that the kids I've come across so far are raw, and they'll meet you halfway if you're willing to meet them halfway. In another school I was at, kids wouldn't say hello to you if you met them in the street. These kids will.

Mr Fielding here suggests that the young people are to some degree unspoiled by the ills of modern life. Mrs Anderson echoes Mr Fielding's account and explains that 'The kids are raw, they're unsophisticated, not street wise, they're very judgmental and they don't challenge notions. They will just accept what their parents tell them or they accept the past and they don't really think to challenge or change people's points of views'. In pointing out the 'sincere', 'honest' 'unsophisticated' and 'not street wise' characteristics of the young people, Mr Fielding and Mrs Anderson indicate that Hillsville's relatively closed universe and homogeneity contribute to the maintenance of a more authentic lifestyle, but also that there is an uncritical aspect of rural life.

Ms Willis provides a particularly vivid account of the notion of the 'raw' and 'unsophisticated' qualities of young rural people in an informal conversation:

I just love to take them to the city 'cause I love to watch their reaction and to see all that diversity. Lots of kids haven't been too far out of this area, and I think the way they behave in other places is quite interesting. When I first started teaching at another school nearby they had the Grade 10 trip to Queensland and we took 30 Grade 10

students to the Gold Coast and they were amazing and they saw things they never saw in that town and they came back and they would go ‘oh man I just saw this bloke who had ear piercing all the way up here [excited voice]’. They just wouldn’t believe it and they would just stare and stare. And I know that there was another teacher from this school who took the kids on an art trip to Brisbane and she had to say to the kids ‘well you’re probably gonna see things you would never see at home. This is a very diverse place. Whatever you do don’t go anywhere without anyone else, make sure you stick together and DON’T STARE’, and she said that ‘cause she was worried that they might get their head bashed in or something like that. But that’s what they used to do, they used to stare like that (Ms Willis).

Although Ms. Willis’s story about the young rural people’s encounter with the city is not about Hillsville’s young people, it mirrors the accounts of the participants in this study and highlights their lack of familiarity with the social and cultural practices of larger cities. Mr Fielding’s thoughts on this matter that ‘I think there is a feeling that “we’re from the country and we’re a lesser cousin of the city”’ suggest that it is precisely the absence of particular practices and knowledges associated with the city that causes other people to stigmatise Hillsville and its residents. This stigmatisation also generates a contradictory response for the young rural people who to some degree at the same time internalise this stigmatisation and cast their own practices as superior to city practices. These observations start to indicate how place is implicated in shaping the lifeworld of young rural people. The importance of interactions with people beyond Hillsville in the stories of both students and teachers especially highlight Massey’s (1991) notion that ‘the other is always implicated in constituting the meanings of place’. The narratives also connect with Farrugia’s (2014) emphasis on the need to conceptualise rural places as extraverted in order to move beyond the rural-urban dichotomy and more adequately understand how the subjectivities of young rural people are constructed.

Sport, inclusion and exclusion

The young people’s ambiguous experiences of Hillsville can be further explained by their experiences of leisure, especially sport. The dominance of sport in Hillsville is constructed in the broader context of a valorisation of physical activity linked to the dominance of the primary industries and the high numbers of manual workers (ABS 2013a), as well as the lack of other formal leisure activities. This milieu constructs a cultural hierarchy of skills and

knowledge in which manual labour and physical prowess is valued over mental labour. This hierarchy is mirrored in the young people's experiences of inclusion and exclusion through their involvement in sport.

It was a common theme amongst all the participants that sport facilitated social interaction and cohesion. Anne, for example, says that 'I play a little bit of tennis, I fill in for people sometimes. But that's mainly for social. It's a lot of fun when I do it'. Teachers also agreed that social capital was generated through sport. Mrs Willis pointed out that 'It's a sporty community and that in itself can develop relationships and links with other people from different areas and that can be a good thing 'cause you can meet people through that'. Ms Dawson and Ms Carpenter further encapsulated the common perception that 'you struggle in a town like this if you don't like sport. There isn't a lot to do so most people play sport here' and that 'kids who don't play sport are probably at home playing x-box, or they are lazy, or working hard in the family business'. Community events and socialisation revolved around football matches, as evidenced in routine comments such as 'Ralph and I play together most weekends' (Stephen), 'Mum's going to watch me play' (Billy) and 'Dad's the umpire' (Ryan). Sport, in particularly football, was central to the social and cultural capital of the community. People who were not involved in sport were often constructed as 'lazy'; participation in sport was associated with a high degree of prestige.

The importance of sport has been linked to the development of social capital in other parts of rural Australia (Atherley 2006), and competitive sport to the construction of a place-based identity (Tonts and Atherley 2010). However, it was also clear from many young people's stories that general participation in sport played a key role in the construction of Hillsville as both a social and cultural home through its connection with physicality. For many young people, especially young males, participation in sport reinforced their sense of inclusion with the community. John's comment that 'all your mates play sport...all the boys here play sport. We just muck around and have a good time' points to sport as integral to the young men's geographical and social worlds.

The cultural knowledge associated with sport and football, such as the high value placed on its physical quality and its superior status to mental activities was symbolically represented through the body on the sports field. The exaggerated display of hegemonic masculinity in the football events included a celebration of physical strength and verbal and physical expression which often turned somewhat aggressive. Excessive alcohol use also tended to

accompany football events, with many young men identifying 'footie' with 'partying' and 'drinking', reinforcing the status of football in the community as a source of celebration and camaraderie. Rose's and Trudy's explanation that 'Alcohol is such a big thing down here. Some of the boys don't turn up for school because they were drinking the day before' also starts to indicate some of the ways in which geographical context shaped some young people's school experiences.

The importance of sport in the life of the community meant that the young footballers were celebrated and their actions largely normalised and laughed away as 'boys being boys' or 'hormones', a frequent comment among parents, teachers and students. One teacher, Ms Carpenter, highlighted the connection between sport and hegemonic masculinity in her observation that 'the community has its own way of doing things which is different from mainstream. Just the way they accept things that people do...like certain sporting groups might get up to a lot of mischief and stuff and it's just not recognised as being a bad thing 'cause they are hailed as being such heroes'. The celebrated nature of sport in the cultural capital of the community meant that the dominant view was that participation in sport and its associated activities was universally valued in the community. Ms Carpenter's comment highlights how geographic isolation generates more than physical barriers in its association with an ethnocentric worldview which excluded alternative ways of living and knowing.

Despite the general acceptance of sport as the superior leisure activity in the town there were many young people who did not share this view. This was even suggested by some of the young men who were engaged with football, in comments such as 'girls do not play football because it's too physical and they're scared of being hurt' (Stephen). This indicates that social capital developed through sport is strongly associated with gender in a rural context, confirming the findings of some studies which indicate that public rural leisure spaces tend to be constructed as boys' spaces (Dunkley 2004; Tucker 2003; Tucker and Matthews 2001). The exclusion of a group of young people from participation in sports also supports the call by a small body of literature not to overemphasise the positive effects of capital building through the sports (Dempsey 1992; Tonts 2005; Tonts and Atherley 2010). Indeed, many young men spoke of their experience of a masculine performance based on physicality as oppressive and exclusive. Stanley, for example, explains that 'if you don't like sport then you don't really do a lot here. I don't really like sport. I'm not very competitive. I spend most of my time at home...maybe going for a walk, maybe playing computer games'. Nick's comment that he enjoys 'just being able to hop on my bike and do what I want' also

demonstrates his rejection of the norms and values surrounding participation in community sports. In contrast to the dominant view in the community that non-participation in sport was an expression of inherent laziness these young men link their non-participation to processes of marginalization and exclusion.

Young women's accounts of the exclusionary qualities of sport were similar to the young men's stories, but were often more explicit about the risk of being hurt when playing sport. Tina asserts that 'the boys are just so competitive. It's life and death for them. They are so rough and we sometimes get hurt. Other times they just ignore us', and Anne says that 'you got to be like the top boys to do it [play sport]. It's not like you have a game for fun. For them it's dead serious. They have fights over it and everything'. This group of young people actively rejected participation in the dominant activity because they experienced many of the aspects associated with playing sport, such as the high level of competitiveness and physical and verbal aggression, as incompatible with their own identity construction.

Many of the young people who resisted the culturally exalted (Connell 2005) hierarchy of sport and physical activity also refused participation in this because of its association with alcohol consumption. Consistent with the trend for higher levels of alcohol consumption to be present in rural areas (Tasmania Medicare Local 2012), and in football clubs (Palmer 2011; Thompson et al. 2011; Snow and Munro 2000) some young people particularly nominated the association between alcohol use and football as a key reason for their lack of engagement with sport. In an informal conversation with Gary and Phillip they explain that 'the footballers are the people who kick a ball through a couple of sticks and drink alcohol'. Although Gary and Phillip are part of the wannabes they are located at the very bottom of the dominant groups because of their lack of interest in physical sports and involvement in playing music. The young people's stories about leisure and alcohol consumption suggest that they embraced a marginalised status because of their sense that the dominant form of masculinity in combination with alcohol consumption was incompatible with their subjective constructions of masculinity and femininity. Even when some young people actively chose to reject participation in sport because of an understanding that their own cultural practices were superior, they experienced sport as exclusive because of its central role in the social and cultural life of the town and the lack of alternative leisure activities. The result was that a significant number of young people felt excluded from the warm circle of community life.

A specific factor in some young women's dislike of participation in sport was the association between the hegemonic masculinity–sport–alcohol nexus and a highly sexualised view of women, confirming the link between rural leisure spaces as 'boys' spaces' (Tucker and Matthews 2001) and the understanding that 'boys will be boys' (Dunkley 2004). Maggie, Sarah and Kristin explain how they perceive this combination as fuelling an understanding of intimacy in sexual terms rather than in the sense of friendship and companionship:

Sarah: The cool boys are cool just because they go out and drink

Kristin: ...and have sex with the girls.

Sarah: It really depends on how many girls you had sex with...the more they had sex with they come up the popular scale.

Maggie: Yep. And apparently that automatically makes the girls cool. So the cool boys hang out with the cool boys and they all have sex together and drink together.

Sarah: Most of them play football and basketball. Some of them play cricket. To me...if someone doesn't have sex these day they're called frigid...you know...I call them sensible for not doing it.

Maggie: They don't respect the girls they have sex with. See the girls think they do it so that they can be cool.

Sarah: It also depends if you're in a relationship with them. Before you have sex with them they treat you like a little princess and they have all respect for you. But as soon as you have sex with them that's all they want.

Maggie: So you know, it was never respect. They were just trying to get into your pants.

For these young girls, the perception that intimate relationships with the boys were sexually and emotionally exploitative because of the nexus between sport, drinking and hegemonic masculinity made them withdraw from engagement in these activities. Whilst they realised this choice placed them near the bottom of the social hierarchy, this understanding co-existed with a desire to reject these practices.

Other young women saw engagement in the same practices as prestigious because it afforded privilege and status, yet it was not experienced as unproblematic, as Susan and Wendy point out:

Wendy: Yeah and we're in a big group of about 10 or so. We all sit around on the lawn and someone will get up and everyone will start bitching about that person. About what happened at a party in the weekend or whatever.

Susan: It's a horrible thing. But everyone does it. You can't even stop yourself from doing it. Sometime you'll think 'I don't want to do that anymore' or 'I don't want to be that person' and then 10 minutes later you'll think about something and say it anyway.

Wendy: So pretty much you're worrying all the time about the other girls bitching about you and what's going to happen to you.

In this conversation Wendy and Susan explain how hegemonic masculinity permeated the social relations of their friendship group. Whilst they earned a degree of prestige and status from complying with the requirements of hegemonic masculinity, it also came at the cost of being labelled as sluts by both the broader community and the boys they were involved with. The role of gossip in the lives of young rural people seems directly relevant, considering the strengths of social capital in small rural towns, yet little investigation into this dynamic has been conducted (Haugen and Villa 2006). In this study many of the young girls described how a deviation from prescribed gender norms was met with gossip as a means of social control. It frequently led to the exclusion of stigmatised girls from their own friendship groups because once they were labelled as sluts, their peers from the cool girls group tended also to exclude them to avoid the embarrassment through association with the stigmatised girls. This meant that the boundaries between the young women who rejected the practices associated with hegemonic masculinity and the young women who embraced it were always fluid, with quiet girls becoming cool girls and cool girls becoming quiet girls.

The sense of prestige that some young women gained through their participation in the celebrations associated with football events or involving 'footy people' was complicated by feelings of exploitation and sexualisation. In their conversation above Wendy and Susan reveal the way in which conformity to the principles of hegemonic masculinity created feelings of behaving in unauthentic ways, which were detrimental to their sense of self ('It's a horrible thing. But everyone does it'). The young women describe how competitiveness and 'bitching' about each other alienates them from their peers, and breaks down solidarity and nurturing and caring relations.

Awareness of the negative aspects of hegemonic masculinity was also expressed by those young men who were successful participants in it. Ryan, almost dejectedly, observes ‘that’s what you do here...play footy, get drunk, play footy, get drunk...there’s nothing else to do’. There was a widespread awareness amongst all the respondents that the prestige attached to football and its associated practices was derived from its status as the only ‘game in town’. The dearth of outlets for leisure activities was noted by Ralph, Stephen and John in an interview, with John commenting that ‘We don’t have real cafés here...but we like to go and have coffee at the shop. It’s part of growing up you know, of becoming a young adult, to go and have coffee with your mates’. These stories points to the limited opportunities for the assertion of independence in Hillsville, and captures how participation in those was often tinged with a sense of social exclusion.

Social and cultural capital, and social division

In different ways and to varying degrees, all the young people in this study shared feelings of exclusion and marginalisation in relation to life in Hillsville. However, one group of young people felt the limitations of their rural lifestyle more deeply than any other group because of their stigmatised status and associated social marginalisation. John conveys the idea that the young people living in the local housing estate were constructed as outsiders in his observation that ‘they are the bad people who live in the ghetto...people who don’t have jobs and they take money off other people, they are dirty and have heaps of kids, they don’t get out and about’. In Hillsville ‘being bad’ was associated with residing in the local housing estate, poverty, unemployment, involvement with drugs and alcohol, blended families and particularly low levels of geographical mobility. This construction of a vulnerable group of people as ‘bad’ because of their struggle to conform to an idealised rural lifestyle of hard work, productivity and self-reliability in the face of global economic restructuring represents one aspect of what Tonts (2005) refers to as the dark side of social capital in his study of inclusion and exclusion in a rural town. The role of this dark side of social capital in facilitating and maintaining processes of marginalisation is pointed out by Anne in her comment that ‘I wouldn’t walk through there...I guess it’s just like what we have grown up knowing, like “the ghetto... Uhhh don’t go there” ’. Anne’s comment demonstrates how the labelling of the residents living in Hillsville’s public housing sector is intergenerational. Memories and perceptions are shared across generations and warnings about ‘the ghetto’ and its residents are passed on from parents to children.

The characteristics of ‘bad people’ were constructed through a comparison with those of ‘good people’. Trudy explains that ‘You also have other people who do drugs but they’re not as bad, like they have a good personality and a good family and stuff like that’. What Trudy indicates here is that it is not so much the actual activities that ‘bad’ and ‘good’ people are involved in that defines them but the nature of their family social and cultural capital. Her thoughts suggest that social divisions in Hillsville are not only based on economic resources and engagement in particular activities, but also on access to social and cultural resources such as a traditional family structure and a ‘good’ personality made possible through access to secure and well-paid employment and social connections. This construction of the estate people as outsiders connects with Morris’ (2008, 2012a) finding that the young people in his study of masculinity and schooling in a small town in rural Ohio established a hierarchy between tough and resilient ‘rednecks’ and dirty ‘rutters’. His conclusion that this distinction provided the ‘rednecks’ with a sense of pride in the face of global economic restructuring may also be relevant to the young people of Hillsville who were experiencing the effects of job losses and closing down of businesses on their families and friends on an everyday basis.

The young people living on the local housing estate had to a high degree internalised their ‘bad’ identity, speaking of themselves as ‘the people from the ghetto’, and were acutely aware of the link between their disadvantage and their stigmatisation in the community. Erin, for example, associated her experiences of social exclusion with ‘bullies and name calling and all the posh people bagging you out and won’t talk to you’. Peter further notes that his friendship group is always ‘being blamed for property damage’ because ‘there is nothing else to do so we hang out on the streets’. These stories confirm the dearth of leisure activities for young people in rural areas and the link to engagement in marginal activities (HREOC 1999; Wyn et al. 1998; White 1999), but they also suggest that the high level of social capital in rural areas includes a dark (Tonts 2005) or exclusive aspect which plays a role in restricting some young people’s access to social and cultural activities.

Mrs Norton adds further insights into Erin’s and Peter’s stories through her explanation of the systematic nature of labelling in the community:

There’s a lot of knowing-everybody so if you come from a family which is known in the community the kid might be tainted. There’s a class distinction, I think, which is prominent in this town. There’s families who are known in the town and they have lived here all their lives, and because they are known as disadvantaged families or whatever,

the children are classed as disadvantaged. Biggest issue with this town is that employers know families and so that can disadvantage the disadvantaged families 'cause they label that family and that child's ethics and whatever (interview with Mrs Norton).

The strength of the dark side of social capital in Hillsville resulted in a double disadvantage for the young people living in 'the ghetto'. On the one hand they were largely excluded from competing for employment opportunities in Hillsville because their social background and contacts were considered deviant. On the other hand their local knowledges and networks did not permit them to move away from the town to utilise employment opportunities outside Hillsville because of the strong attachment to place and people, and their very locally-focused skills base.

There were also other low-income families in the community doing it tough, with difficult and exploitative labour market experiences influencing the family unit. Tina, for example, speaks of the low-paid jobs in the secondary labour market in her reflection that 'it's not well paid. Mum and dad work for the factory. Dad works on the forklift so that's better paid, but my step-mum she works there too and she doesn't get a real good pay 'cause she just does the basic stuff'. Thomas elaborates on the work associated with low pay and points to the repetitive and tedious aspects of working in a factory in his account that 'My dad used to work there but he quit. There was just nothing to do, you would sit around heaps and do nothing. Then he found a job planting trees and that's all right and at least he's outside doing something. Dad said lots of people left the place because workers were being underpaid'. Whilst Thomas points to his dad's experiences of alienation at work because of a lack of involvement in and understanding of the labour process, Paul identifies manual work as being challenging because of its physical nature: 'Dad said the first day he started, he came home and said "you work that much, you got this jacket, when you take it off at the end of the day it is soaked with sweat and you're aching all over" '. Commenting on Paul's statement, Stephen confirms the stories of backbreaking work in his consideration of his father's descriptions of work in a factory: 'Dad got an office job out there and he just works on and off and makes sure containers get all around the world. But in the factory where they're doing all the hard work, it's hard on you, dad says there's forever people who are getting time off and grants to go and see the doctor 'cause their bodies ache and you end up with a bad back'. These stories suggest that a significant group of people working in Hillsville's secondary labour market experienced alienation through low-paid work, physical and mental exhaustion

and a high level of risk of physical injury. Yet these accounts also suggest that manual labour and working physically hard was valued subjectively. Even though there was a tendency for the young people from low-income families to suffer a degree of labelling and exclusion in the community, their families' attachment to the labour market, no matter how marginal, meant that they were integrated into the community to a greater degree than 'the ghetto' people.

Family life

The physical and mental stress created by these work conditions had a spillover effect onto family life. Tina declares that 'I hate my stepmother. She sometimes locks the fridge. The other day I had a glass of milk and she saw me and she was so angry and sent me to my room. I don't get it'. Tina's statement captures the association between working in the secondary labour market and stories of family breakdown, re-partnering, and physical and verbal aggression which created tension and conflict in the young people's everyday lives. Whilst Tina lives with her dad every second week, many of the stories of the home lives of the young people from low incomes were about missing or abusive fathers. Beverly, for example, told me that 'I never see my dad. He doesn't care about me or what I want and I don't care about him', and Megan explained that 'My sister used to live there but no longer and my brother got adopted out. Mum came home from work one day and dad just literally went off at her and told her to sign the papers and said he was gonna bash her'. These stories of family breakdown and conflict suggest that insecure work and financial difficulties for their parents created difficult life circumstances for this group of young participants.

The spillover effect of work onto family life also manifested in the way the young people spent time with their family. The young people living on the local housing estate were the most likely to report spending time on their own. Erin 'mainly just watch tele' in her leisure time and Megan 'sometimes just fall asleep in front of the tele'. Other young people explicitly spoke of feeling bored. Ralph asserted that 'there's a lack of things to do, you got to keep yourself occupied, you end up sitting at home watching TV all the time...last night I got to bed at 2am', Paul said he 'get sick of playing x box and play station and there's nothing to do really, except going to school' and Tina 'Spent all day at the pool this Sunday. I was there when it opened and I left when it closed. I get bored in the weekends'. Often these young people described their interaction with their parents as minimal because of the parents' physical and mental exhaustion after work, their shift work schedule or the mental exhaustion

associated with a disrupted home life. Whilst this group of young people all reported feeling bored and having ‘nothing to do’, the lack of access to leisure activities was most keenly felt by the ghetto people. The systematic labelling operating in the town worked to exclude this group of young people from participating in the social and cultural life of the town, and their low geographic mobility prevented them from accessing leisure opportunities outside Hillsville.

In contrast to the experiences of the young people from low-income backgrounds, other young people reported more structured home lives. Susan, Rose and Anita, for example, all talk about coming ‘home from school and helping out on the farm’ and Nigel ‘go wood cutting together with my dad. We did a chainsaw course together the other day’. For this group of young people spending time together as a family characterised their lifestyles. Rose’s family often ‘ends up going away together because Dad rides motorbikes’ and Susan’s family frequently ‘go shopping and to the cinema and further away to see family’. These stories confirm the importance of parental resources in young people’s abilities to construct creative and purposeful lives (Devine 2005; Halliday 2009), especially in a geographically isolated setting where employment and leisure opportunities have become further restricted by global economic restructuring (Alloway and Dalley-Trim 2009).

The role of parental involvement in controlling their children’s identity construction, friendships and social activities was emphasised by Mrs Prior:

I don’t know that there are any places they [the young people] can hang out here, but then I haven’t pushed them to do that because my kids are a little bit gullible and I don’t really want them to fall into the wrong crowd. I’m trying to control it. But it’s hard in such a small place where they see each other all the time. You see, the kids usually form groups depending on what their parents do. Now you’ve got the private school as well and that’s separated the kids further. Before that everyone went to the high school. The kids from the two schools don’t hang out together from what I’ve noticed. Who they hang out with really depends on who the parents are friends with’ (Mrs Prior).

Mrs Prior’s story points to the role of parental social and cultural capital in creating and maintaining clear boundaries between stigmatised groups of young people in Hillsville and their own children. The use of parental economic, social and cultural capital in constructing particular outcomes for children has been researched in other settings (Devine 2005; Halliday

Irwin 2009; Jæger, M and Holm 2007). However, the role of parental resources in Hillsville was particularly important in shaping the young people's lives because of the limited leisure activities in the small town. The consequences of community divisions were especially severe for the young people already stigmatised in the community because of their contribution to further excluding these young people from social and cultural activities.

Parents consciously used their resources to construct lives for their children that excluded 'bad' community influences. This use of resources was especially noticeably through the participants' accounts of their involvement in parties. As Ryan points out, 'It gets a bit boring pretty quick but then there's always a party on. Parties are quite big here'. However, not all parties were open to everyone, as Rose highlights in her comment that 'in Hillsville the people from the ghetto don't go. But everybody else goes, like all the cool people anyway'. Rose's story indicates how the construction of 'good' and 'bad' people is manifested in access to specific leisure activities in Hillsville such as parties. Mrs Beckett explains that the strategies employed by parents to keep their children 'out of trouble' include such measures as picking the children up at night, calling the parents of the child having the party to make sure the party includes parental supervision and making sure the child only goes to parties registered with the local police. The practices employed by some parents to keep their children 'out of trouble' worked to distinguish this group of parents and their children from other families in Hillsville. Despite the common perception of Hillsville as an egalitarian and classless place, common parental practices such as 'registered parties' contributed to the maintenance of the construction of insiders and outsiders.

Variations in experiences of rural life

Although a high level of ambiguity characterised all of the participants' stories about their lives in Hillsville, perceptions of risk in and beyond the town were mediated by the nature of the young people's social and cultural capital. For example, Shaun's questioning of another class member's decision to go to university in his comment that 'It's just not safe anywhere else these days' reflects his close relationship to the area through his tight-knit family connections. Similarly, Paul who is 'born and bred here, never been out of the state' thinks that 'it's actually really boring here' but would never want to leave because 'all my family is here, I would always end up coming back here'. These comments pinpoint the importance of social capital in facilitating knowledge of the local community and other community members, and the fear associated with not knowing the area and people around you.

A more global outlook was developed where there were family practices of relating to the city and its people. Stanley explains that ‘I sometimes go to Springfield, especially to see my aunty. I like the hustle and bustle of the city. I would rather live in a city. I like the noise. I love it. And I wouldn’t get hay fever there...’. The importance of social and cultural capital extending beyond the local community in producing familiarity and more positive feelings about the city is further encapsulated in Lauren’s and Rose’s stories. Lauren’s account of often visiting her ‘family, Nan and Pop and my other Pop and some friends...there are always some of them I can stay with’ and Rose’s account of ‘mainly spending time with the family in the city...with all my family members there, my uncle, my Nan and a Pop and an aunty and another aunty and uncle in another city’ show how experiences of rurality differed according to the nature of the young men’s and young women’s social and cultural capital. Emily’s observation that ‘there’s not much to do here’ and her desire to ‘get out of here to see what the rest of the world looks like’ connects with her frequent visits to family members living in regional towns around the state. Whilst Paul who is deeply attached to the area through his tight-knit social networks perceives the boredom of Hillsville as less risky compared to the unfamiliarity of the area beyond Hillsville, Emily sees the option of staying in Hillsville and enduring its boredom as being a more risky choice than not participating in the opportunities offered by the city because of her more extensive social and cultural capital.

A rural habitus

The young people’s understandings of living in an isolated area, particularly their ambiguous relationships with Hillsville and the city, can be more closely examined by looking at their experiences through Bourdieu’s (1990) concept of the habitus. The concept of the habitus especially helps to explain how the objective social reality of rural life and the internalised subjective worlds of individuals are inextricably bound together to produce particular experiences and educational choices. Simmel’s (1950) theory of the modern metropolis and Connell’s (2005) theory of the gender order are employed to help illuminate rural and gendered aspects of the young people’s habitus.

Based on the participants’ account of life in Hillsville a distinctive rural habitus can be identified. Key features of this habitus included a deep absorption in the local area through identification with place, facilitated by identification with particular people with whom the young people had long-standing relationships. The high level of social capital was accompanied by a cultural capital centred on physicality, which was grounded in the town’s

working class environment, sport as the dominant form of organised leisure, and place-based social and cultural activities such as hunting. The young people's experiences with Hillsville's natural environment were linked with embedded experiences of nature as a key element of the rural habitus through interaction with the natural environment and its inhabitants. One particular aspect of the young people's involvement with the natural environment was their relationship to animals. These relationships were often seen as a way of contributing to the family unit, suggesting that a form of self-reliance was part of the rural habitus. Identification with particular forms of masculinities and femininities constructed through the resources available in Hillsville's rural context was also a key aspect of the young people's rural habitus.

Social capital

A key theme running through the participants' stories about life in a rural area was that of ambiguity, and this operated on multiple levels. Life in Hillsville was especially experienced as contradictory because of the high level of social capital in the town. This generated feelings of security and belonging but also feelings of oppression and risk because of the association between social capital and a socially intrusive environment. This aspect of the rural habitus can be further elucidated through Simmel's (1950) idea of the existence of an 'unambiguous identity in the eyes of others' in rural communities. The young participants' accounts of 'knowing everybody' and 'always knowing someone who can help' revealed the importance of an unambiguous identity in the small community. The fixed sense of self provided by recognising other community members and oneself being recognised as part of a particular family group generated feelings of stability and permanence which led to a sense of belonging and attachment to the community. The unambiguous identity also worked as a form of rural collective identity channelled through the dominant community social and cultural capital. These feelings were especially linked to a value system of pride in the authentic nature of country life and its superiority over city life.

The rural unambiguous identity was also a source of tension in the lives of the young people, influencing their relationships with Hillsville and their perceptions of self because of the high level of social control and limited means of social and cultural activities available in the town. The young people's difficulties in compensating for the lack of leisure activities and alternative forms of self-expression in Hillsville by going to the city was complicated by the barrier of distance and a sense that the rural habitus was incompatible with city life. The young people's experiences of life in the city as unfamiliar to them led to feelings of

inferiority in relation to the area beyond Hillsville. These feelings, coupled with pride in country life and a deep embeddedness in the local area, meant that many young people perceived the area beyond Hillsville as foreign and frightening.

The young people's perceptions of and reactions to city life can be further illuminated with Simmel's (1950) theory of the modern metropolis. In his work on the impact of the modern metropolis on human behaviour, he argues that 'The temptation to appear "to the point," to appear concentrated and strikingly characteristic, lies much closer to the individual in brief metropolitan contacts than in an atmosphere in which frequent and prolonged association assures the personality of an unambiguous image of himself in the eyes of the other'. The participants in this study found their rural identity, based on a deep knowledge of their local area, grounded in prolonged, close and personal associations, challenged in the fleeting meetings with seemingly indifferent and impersonal city people. Commonly the young people shared a fear of the alien environment where they felt 'uncomfortable' and 'stressed out' because of the indifferent attitude of city people and the objectification and rationalisation of social relationships in the city.

The young people's reactions to life in the city as described by Mrs Willis, the staring and exclamations when observing unfamiliar cultural norms, present as the opposite to the calculated reactions of cosmopolitan citizens who 'react with their head, not their heart' (Simmel 1950). For Simmel, this indifferent and reserved attitude is a key attribute of the blasé attitude which he argues characterises the cosmopolitan individual. The teachers' description of their young rural students as 'raw', 'sincere' and 'unsophisticated' captures their perception that these young people do not possess this blasé attitude. The lack of characteristics of this form of urban habitus helps to explain the young people's ambivalent relationship to both Hillsville and the city. On one hand they felt stigmatised because the characteristics of their rural habitus were different from the urban practices which are seen as mainstream by the majority of the population. On the other hand they celebrated rural life as a superior culture untouched by the ills of modern life.

Cultural capital, physicality and self-sufficiency

Whilst the young people's long-term and close relationships with other community members led to a deep social and cultural immersion in the community, their immersion in the local area also had a physical aspect to it. This was particularly evident in the working class culture of the town the continuing opportunities for manual labour. The young people's accounts

revealed how hard, physical labour was a part of daily life for their families and friends. Although this kind of work was associated with physical and mental problems, it was still highly valued in the community and subjectively, especially because labour market participation, no matter how casual, was linked to integration with the community. The importance of physicality to the young people's lives was especially evident in their stories of participation in sport, the key organised leisure activity in the town. Football games were particularly valued because of their highly physical nature as well as their role in structuring the social and cultural life of town.

Physicality as a key element of the rural habitus was also evident in the young participants' relationships with the natural environment and its inhabitants. Robert's account of running around naked hunting bugs in the long, green grass and Paul's account of navigating the countryside when going hunting indicate how the young people were physically embedded in the community. Anita's memory of standing with the dam with her father as a little child learning to read the natural landscape powerfully captures how experiences of nature become embedded in the young people's consciousness through their social capital. The involvement of the body and the senses in these experiences facilitated deep and personal relationships with the local area which stood in stark contrast to the reserved and calculated interactions associated with the blasé attitude. This physical aspect of the rural habitus, which the young people also associated with authenticity, was a key part of their immersion in their local area, and an aspect of their identities that many felt could not be maintained in the city. The physical relationship with the natural environment was not just one relating to leisure, but also one relating to cultivation, productivity and hunting. This was associated with a form of self-reliance in terms of supplying the family unit with foods and income; another aspect of the rural habitus not easily maintained in the city where relationships evolve around impersonal money transactions between vast numbers of people.

Masculinities and femininities

Physicality as an aspect of the rural habitus also played an important role in shaping the young people's experiences of gender. The highly gendered nature of their embedded experiences in nature, with the tendency for young women to care for animals and young men to take on a provider role, start to indicate how Hillsville's rural setting influenced gender relations. The construction of particular forms of masculinities and femininities was also linked to the interrelationship between global, regional and local forces (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Aapola, Gonick and Harris 2005). The impact of global economic

restructuring meant that many local businesses had closed, but Hillsville's location also meant that some large businesses were able to remain in the area and continue to provide some opportunities for manual work which supported a traditional form of masculinity. However, new technological advances such as high speed Internet contributed to the young people's awareness of desirable cultural lifestyles associated with the city, and although these lifestyles were desired by the young people they were at odds with traditional constructions of gender.

The town's working class culture, the continuing strength of the primary industries and the large number of labourers in Hillsville formed the basis for the existence of a traditional form of working class masculinity. This form of masculinity was strengthened by the importance of sport as a key leisure activity, and footy as central to the life of the town. The importance of engagement in place-based activities such as hunting, shooting and cutting wood to the young men's sense of self confirms findings by other studies on rural masculinity that rural spaces offer limited access to alternative forms of masculinity (McCleod and Yates 2006; Kenway, Kraack and Kickey-Moody 2006). The construction of this kind of masculinity as superior to other forms of masculinities and femininities in the community especially took place through sporting events which worked to mediate cultural capital through social interaction. In the community the young women's exclusion from the manual labour market and high contact sports such as football and basketball meant that they often performed supporting roles, such as nurturing sick animals or being spectators to the performances on the sports field. The young women's comments that their non-involvement in high contact sports were linked to 'getting hurt' (Emily) and 'it's life and death for the boys' (Tina) indicates the role of these sports in creating and maintaining the defining characteristics of masculinities and femininities. The data contains similarities to Bryant's (1999) notions of 'feminine pride' and 'masculine pride' in the importance of nurturing and physical roles in the lives of the young people. However, these experiences co-existed with other experiences of femininity such as performances of a form of hyper femininity or emphasised femininity (Connell 2005). Other young women responded to the dominance of hegemonic masculinity in the community by performing a more invisible form of femininity, similar to aspects of Sack's (1983) notion of women as 'invisible farmers'.

Although the young women in this study performed traditional forms of femininities their stories also revealed similarities to Aapola, Gonick and Harris' (2005) concepts of power feminism and DIY and Grrrlpower feminism. The sense of prestige some young women gained through their participation in the celebrations associated with football events or 'footy people' was especially complicated by feelings of exploitation and sexualisation. Feelings of alienation from oneself and peers associated with the constant pressure to compete for prestige were intensified by the strict social control operating through gossip and sanctions of exclusion and stigmatisation within the young women's peer groups and in the broader community. The young women's stories of, and concern with, their experiences of exploitation and sexualisation reflect the key idea of this form of feminism that the personal is political. However, although the young women in this study voiced their concerns they did not actively present themselves as powerful, angry or tough which Aapola, Gonick and Harris suggest are key characteristics of DIY and Grrrlpower. This difference may partly be explained by the young women's location in a rural area and their adherence to other forms of femininity such as 'feminine pride', 'emphasised femininity' or 'invisible farmers'.

The experiences of some young men that their involvement in sport was not only a source of prestige but was also preventing them from engaging in important, alternative forms of knowledge and practice point to the young men's desire to extend the gendered practices of their habitus to include practices more cosmopolitan in nature. Ralph's comment that 'that's what you do here...play footy...get drunk' and Stephens' assertion that 'part of growing up is to drink coffee with your mates but we don't have any cafes here' encapsulate many young men's desire to engage in practices which could afford possibilities for reconstructing their views of themselves and relationships with others. These experiences highlight how the construction of femininities and masculinities take place in the context of globalisation and individualisation (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Aapola, Gonick and Harris 2005).

Whilst many of the young men in this study felt a strong connection to their local town and its social and cultural practices, this co-existed with a sense that their performance to a particular form of hegemonic masculinity meant that they were missing out on important social and economic opportunities. The kind of masculinity that characterised the young men in this study was similar to the 'melancholic' form of masculinity described by Kenway, Kraack and Hickey-Moody in their study of the rural town of Morwell in which economic restructuring had 'put the men on the scrap heaps' (2006: 67). Despite many shared experiences the young people's experiences of life in Hillsville were mediated by their social

and cultural capital. A social and cultural capital closely linked to Hillsville was a key factor in shaping a habitus deeply embedded in the local area; young people not in regular contact with the city and its residents perceived the city as a dangerous place and its citizens as immoral. In contrast, social and cultural practices which extended beyond the local area produced a more omnivorous habitus which was more cosmopolitan in nature. Young people who were more regularly exposed to life in the city were more likely to feel a sense of liberation in the cityscape which was associated with increased anonymity, freedom from Hillsville's unified social universe and its associated social control and an assertion of a more individualised form of identity.

There was an indication that some of Hillsville's young people suffered a double disadvantage. Some individuals were labelled deviant because of their economic situation and difficult intimate relationships, and because of this they were excluded from access to resources such as participation in sport and thus the general life of the town and private parties. This indicates a tension between the common perception of Hillsville as an 'inclusive', 'caring' and classless community and the actual practices employed in the town to maintain clear boundaries between different status groups. Similar processes of labelling and stigmatisation of individuals with access to few resources in a rural setting have also been described by Morris (2008, 2012a). These insights draw attention to the emergence of new power dynamics as a result of an increased interaction between local and global forces which in Hillsville was associated with the closure of local businesses and the loss of jobs for many people.

Chapter 6: The Field of education

We have this thing that sporting people are so important. I admire that dedication, and I also admire the dedication of the kids who work hard in class but that's not valued here. Why? It's the same dedication putting in all that work as it is running around the sports grounds. In this community we push kids to be the best sportsman. We don't care if you can read and write but hey, you can play football! (Mrs Norton).

Introduction

In this chapter I identify the key players of Hillsville High to examine the dynamics of the informal school culture. Bourdieu's idea of field (1990) is used to loosely capture the education system as a social domain in which actors struggle over resources and honours. This chapter relies mainly on observational data collected during participant observation, with some subjective accounts used to illuminate particular events and dynamics. Subjective experiences of education and responses to the formal school curriculum captured in the interview material and informal conversations will be explored in detail in chapters 9 and 10.

In this chapter I describe a school struggling to achieve its objectives with limited resources, and daily tensions arising from differences in the cultural capital valued by the education department and that of the students. Although there are similarities with other working class schools described in the literature (Connell et al. 1982; Walker 1988; Willis 1977), many of the dynamics playing out at Hillsville High are specific to its rural context. I focus in particular on the carry-over of the form of hegemonic masculinity that was found to dominate the community culture into the school environment, and identify its centrality in the informal school culture.

Hillsville High

The first impression I had of Hillsville High was that of a building belonging to an industrial era rather than a post-industrial one. Despite fresh paint and renovations as a result of the funding distributed during the previous Labor government's 'Education Revolution', the large buildings remain impersonal in their square, factory-like design that oozes standardisation and massification. The surrounding sports facilities are equally spacious, but the rusty wire netting and concrete pathways enclosing them reinforce the image of an encounter with an era that has long been replaced with a new one.

As Mrs Anderson guides me through the school it is obvious that much of the interior design similarly exudes an outdated design, with run-down classrooms connected by long, dark corridors. However, a new area bathed in sunlight from large windows has recently been added. The difference between the areas which are run-down, damaged and lacking in equipment and the new areas is striking. I find that the sunlight and views of the sky facilitated by the new large windows immediately transforms my mood. This experience highlights the importance of an aesthetic learning environment for positive educational experiences. It also drives home the point of the School's and community's reliance on government funding for the continuing development of a progressive learning environment.

As the major high school in the area, most of Hillsville's young people receive their secondary education here. However, the significant proportion of the town's young people attending other schools is reflected in the socio-economic profile of Hillsville High. The majority of the school's students are in the bottom quarter of the socio-economic distribution, with a few students located in the lower and middle quarter and very few in the top quarter (*My School* 2013). This concentration of students from low income families at Hillsville High suggests that a significant proportion of Hillsville's young people from higher income backgrounds attend the local private school or boarding schools in other regional towns. Although the staff/student ratio for full-time equivalent staff at Hillsville High is similar to that of comparable schools (*My School* 2013), the disproportionate number of students from low socio-economic backgrounds means that the school and its teachers face particular challenges associated with attitudes to education and social and economic disadvantage in a rural context.

The area in which Hillsville is located has a lower retention rate from Year 10 to Year 12 than the Tasmanian average, which is one of the lowest of all states and territories (ABS 2011a; Department of Education 2010). This demonstrates the challenge for young rural people to continue on with years 11 and 12 when they need to move away from home to do this, and the continuing (although declining) opportunities for manual labour in Hillsville. The *My School* website shows that Hillsville High's NAPLAN results are below the Australian average on some measures, and close to or above statistically similar schools on other measures. In contrast to the relatively low NAPLAN results, a Tasmanian Education Performance report (2010) reveals good levels of staff and student satisfaction (Department of Education 2010). This indicates good relationships between students and teachers which

may be explained by the high levels of social cohesion that have been found to characterise small rural towns (Bourke 2001; Wierenga 2009; Wyn et al. 1998).

At the time of data collection, the curriculum at Hillsville High was based on the state curriculum. Key subjects included English, Mathematics, Science, Society and History, Health and Wellbeing, the Arts, and Vocational and Applied Learning. A range of personal learning subjects were available, such as AFL, Fitness, Civilisations, Applied Science, Mathematics Methods, Child Studies, Metal and Wood Work, and Leadership. Similar to other schools located in working class areas, Hillsville High did not have a strong extracurricular culture. Activities such as the school leadership group, AFL and various forms of community involvement formed part of the regular school day and could be chosen as personal learning options rather than after-school activities. This is partly a result of the school's rural location which meant that most of the students needed to leave the school premises at the end of the formal school day to catch the bus home.

Strategies were developed by Hillsville High to address concerns about disengagement and early school leaving. For example, curriculum delivery and teaching mode was organised around one core teacher teaching multiple subjects to one class rather than teachers teaching only in their specialised areas. This model of teaching was introduced to strengthen relationships between students and teachers and teachers and parents through the increased contact with one particular teacher. It was also thought that it would increase students' ownership of their immediate study areas and reduce the movement between classrooms to limit disorganisation within the school environment. In addition, teachers had enthusiastically put in place a roster which allowed a certain number of teachers to be away on any given day to counteract the difficulty of recruiting relief teachers (field notes).

Other specific programs and initiatives implemented by Hillsville High to address issues of disengagement and early school leaving included strategies to raise the young people's awareness of their educational opportunities and the promotion of the concept of lifelong learning. This involved the Pathways Planning program, introduced in Tasmanian schools to improve educational outcomes for students (Department of Education 2014). At Hillsville High a Pathways Planning officer was recruited from outside the school sector with the aim to increase students' understandings of possible pathways. The process included frequent individual conversations with the Pathways Planning officer for students in years 8 to 10. Other initiatives included: a program for the most disengaged young men that was designed

to provide them with alternative role models through education and exposure to a variety of masculinities and bonding exercises; and a program involving care of animals, to try to inject aspects of the students' family lives into the school environment (field notes).

The cultural hierarchy of the informal school culture: Insiders and outsiders

Interaction between students and staff at Hillsville High was shaped by the cultural capital based on the valorisation of physical performances that was embedded in the cultural life of the community. A hierarchy similar to Connell's (2005) gender order existed within the informal school culture, with groups ranging from the high status groups of the cool boys, the wannabes and the cool girls to the low status groups of the quiet girls, the nerds and the ghetto people. These categories were created and used on a daily basis by the young people themselves. The one exception to this was the term 'the wannabes' which was partly inspired by some young people's notions of 'the boys who are cool... but not really cool' (Rose and Trudy), and partly imposed by me to illuminate the important distinction between the cool boys and the large group of young men aspiring to join the cool boys' group.

Membership of the cool boys' group was heavily centred on physical performances associated with the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity. Most members of this group were characterised by what Swain (2006: 324) calls muscular athleticism: the possession of a strong and muscular body associated with success on the sporting field. A trendy appearance was favoured by some members of this group, who wore fashionable clothing, jewellery and elaborate hairstyles. Stephen's mum, for example, commented that 'Stephen spends hours in the front of the mirror each morning. Much longer than his sister'. However, these were not exclusive criteria as they did not necessarily exclude other important characteristics. Ralph and Ryan, for example, were much more heavily built than the leader of the cool boys, Robert, whose good sportsmanship, use of humour in challenging the authority of the school and sexual prowess made up for his slighter physique. A form of humour or larrikinism associated with light-heartedness, anti-authoritarianism, anti-intellectualism and deprecation of self and others flagged membership in the cool boys and was summed up in the endless references to 'mucking around' or 'getting into trouble'. Strong sportsmanship and sexual prowess were important qualities of members of this group, and were areas of life where attributes of hegemonic masculinity such as aggressiveness and competitiveness were created and maintained.

Membership in the cool boys was closed and heavily guarded. During the period of participant observation there were no examples of any wannabe's full inclusion in the cool boys' group, even though some wannabes put great efforts into adopting the practices and behaviours of the dominant group to earn the patriarchal dividend (Connell 2005: 79) to gain approval from the cool boys. There were, however, examples of events when members of the wannabes were accepted into the dominant group for a period of time if such an inclusion was perceived to strengthen the position of the superior group in the cultural hierarchy of the school. One example of temporary inclusion in the cool boys' group is the example of Robert's increasing admiration for Bruce because of Bruce's extensive academic knowledge, which sometimes exceeded the knowledge of his teachers. Robert's admiration for Bruce stemmed not only from the potential for destabilisation of teacher authority, but also from the apparent lack of effort Bruce appeared to put into his school work. Although Bruce did not conform to the typical characteristics of hegemonic masculinity, this lack was alleviated by his academic knowledge and was used by the cool boys to undermine the authority of the school and subvert the cultural hierarchy through its association with anti-authoritarianism and larrikinism.

The characteristics of the wannabes were similar to those of the cool boys. Group membership was centred on physical strength, competitiveness and use of a form of humour or larrikinism associated with anti-authoritarianism and anti-intellectualism, as well as involvement with sport and demonstration of sexual prowess. The key difference between the cool boys and the wannabes was the level of commitment to performances of hegemonic masculinity. Whilst some members of the wannabes would join in fights, depreciate other students and attempt to undermine the authority of teachers it was precisely their level of involvement that determined their membership in the wannabes and not the cool boys, with the most physically and verbally offensive acts performed by the cool boys. Other members of the wannabes did not actively perform hegemonic masculinity but passively complied to earn the 'patriarchal dividend'.

Membership in the cool girls was also marked by involvement in sport. However, status within this group was not ascribed so much on the basis of good sportsmanship. Rather, the young women's sports performances in netball or dancing became a means through which to express a particular form of femininity which was used to develop relationships with the cool boys. This took place by the young women watching football games and the young men watching netball games and meeting up after the games. Core currencies for membership in

this group included conformity to a form of emphasised femininity characterised by hyper feminine elements, with the cool girls characterised by a slim body type, and fashionable makeup, hairstyle and clothing. Membership in this group was somewhat fluid because if the young women's rigorous efforts at performing a form of hyper femininity were insufficient in securing relationships with the cool boys they then tended to lose their 'cool' status and become part of the quiet girls' group. This relationship between the cool boys and the cool girls highlights similarities to Connell's (2005) concept of emphasised femininity: the young women used sports to express a form of hyper femininity to gain access to some of the privileges and honours associated with hegemonic masculinity rather than being valued for their sports presentations per se.

Some members of the quiet girls competed for the honours and privileges associated with relationships with the cool boys, and sometimes their efforts led to inclusion in the cool girls' group. Although membership in the quiet girls was fluid, the group had a high number of core members. Some were placed in this group by default through their lack of conformity to gender-based conventions for physical beauty, such as body type, facial structure or clothing styles. Others had made the conscious choice to place themselves outside the parameters of hegemonic masculinity despite the consequences of marginalisation. The reasons for membership in this group started to reveal themselves in the early days of the research when Emily approached me to say emphatically 'you're a researcher, aren't you? If you want to make a difference get rid of those idiots [the cool boys and wannabes]'. Statements like this suggest that self-selecting into the quiet girls' group was often based on a rejection of the principles underpinning hegemonic masculinity and a commitment to some of the principles of power feminism or DIY and Grrrlpower feminism (Aapola, Gonick and Harris 2005). Nevertheless, the femininity performed by these young women was more reflective of an invisible form of femininity than characterised by resistance.

Like many quiet girls, the nerds were characterised by their choice to resist the values associated with a hegemonic performance, even though they were highly aware that this meant they were considered outsiders and constantly subjected to exclusion and harassment. The nerds was a small group consisting exclusively of males who were characterised by their academic success, their overt interest in education or a perception by their peers that they were physically deviant, such as having a big nose, being obese, or being gay. When these overriding characteristics were considered too strong to be alleviated by other features such as sports participation or physical strength, these young males were placed in the nerds group.

Whilst male individuals with an obvious interest in education were assigned to the category of nerds, females with an interest in education were not assigned to the nerds group but remained in either the cool or quiet girls' groups. This confirms anti-intellectualism as a feature of hegemonic masculinity, as intellectualism was perceived to be incompatible with this form of masculinity.

The key characteristic of the ghetto people was their residence in the local housing commission area. It was the only mixed gender group, indicating that severe disadvantage was another overriding characteristic that could not be alleviated by other features and led to placement at the bottom of the social hierarchy. A strong 'us and them' mentality characterised the ghetto people which was frequently expressed in the form of a protest masculinity (Connell 2005). One young woman from this group, Karen, resisted both the hyper femininity and invisible femininity performed by the other young women at the school and performed a form of femininity similar to Connell's idea of resistant femininities (Connell 2005). Whilst other young women from the ghetto people supported Karen's performances of resistant femininity they did not themselves embrace it. Protest masculinities and resistance femininities mostly played out in terms of verbal confrontations and physical attacks on other student groups, especially the cool boys, wannabes and cool girls, to whom the ghetto people referred to as 'teachers' pets' or 'bitches' and 'scum bags'.

For the marginalised groups, some opportunity existed to temporarily escape their stigmatised status. Although the ghetto people formed a clearly defined and stigmatised group, for a few young women who had some affiliation with the quiet girls, Erin and Megan, boundaries between them and the quiet girls were somewhat fluid and they frequently moved between the groups. Limited options also existed for young men to escape the ghetto label and feel some affinity with the dominant groups of young men through their masculine performances. There were times, for example, when Peter was paid the patriarchal dividend and applauded by the cool boys and wannabes through his use of sexism, a game that could not be played by his female counterparts. Similarly, on some occasions Harry was able to use his physical strength or use of sexism to gain recognition from the cool boys.

The value system operating at Hillsville High shaped intra- and inter-group interactions so that some individuals were awarded status according to their performance of and complicity with the principles of hegemonic masculinity. This included identifying others who did not conform to these norms and defining them in terms of their non-conformity which meant that

these individuals were located outside the system of rewards and honours afforded by a masculine performance.

Heroes, drama queens and bad attitudes

The carry-over of community dynamics into the school environment was a major factor shaping the interactions between the young people in the informal school culture and their relationships with their teachers. The socio-cultural climate of the broader community in which schools are located has been found to influence constructions of masculinity in the school context (Kessler et al. 1985; Willis 1977), and in this study the superiority of a particularly physical form of hegemonic masculinity in the informal school culture was deeply linked to the school's location in Hillsville. Through their community engagement both students and teachers carried with them particular behaviours and beliefs valued in the community into the school context. This carry-over played a major part in normalising highly physical masculine performances as 'boys being boys' and 'hormones' (Dunkley 2004; Tucker and Matthews 2001) rather than carefully scrutinising and effectively addressing them.

The school's embeddedness in the community was especially evident in its valorisation of sport. The masculine hierarchy that was displayed in the informal school culture was especially pronounced in the field of sport, where it operated to establish and maintain the gender order. The enthusiasm which characterised many young men's participation in sport suggests that it served as a powerful antidote to their engagement with the formal curriculum:

As a reward the students are given some time out of the classroom and allowed to play a ball game for 20 minutes. The boys are out there straight away, moving fast, encouraging each other. Robert and Ralph on the one team and Billy and Ryan on the other team are getting into the game, tackling and pushing, sometimes jokingly, sometimes seriously, the boys from the opposite team. Susan is standing in a corner. Harry is trying not to get run over. Kristin, William, Thomas and Nick are looking uncomfortable, trying to help out whenever the ball is thrown in their direction. Robert scores a goal. He lets out a roaring cheer, strips off his shirt and starts running around the oval with his arms in the air (field notes).

The similarities of this scenario to the young people's descriptions of a link between sport and processes of inclusion and exclusion in the community are striking. In the extract above,

sport works to provide some young men with a sphere in which they are effective performers while facilitating male bonding, but the raucous and aggressive behaviour taking place on the sports field also marginalises some young men and women who struggle to perform in that field, confirming the link between body contact sports including football and the production of a violent form of masculinity (Fitzclarence and Hickey 1998; Messner 2007; and Sabo and Panepinto 1990). This connection between sport as an arena for the construction and maintenance of masculinity in schools has been widely established (Connell 2000; Gilbert and Gilbert 1998; Swain 2006b), but the relationship between Hillsville High and its social and cultural context is especially pronounced in the use of sport as a reward for engaging with schoolwork. Whilst the use of such activities was seen as a form of social control that had the potential to improve the engagement of the 'cool boys' and 'wannabes' in school life, essentially the school's backing of sporting culture helped to establish the sports culture as powerful. The non-intervention in relation to the marginalisation of some young people on the sports field mirrors the 'boys being boys' perceptions (Dunkley 2004; Tucker and Matthews 2001) and community beliefs that non-sporty people are 'lazy'. This contributed to the normalisation of boisterous behaviours in the school environment through the messages that they were highly valued as an expression of male identity.

The hierarchy of knowledge implied by the dominance of sport in school and community culture was questioned by some staff members, including Mrs Norton, who commented that 'We have this thing that sporting people are so important. I admire that dedication and I also admire the dedication of the kids who work hard in class but that's not valued here. Why? It's the same dedication putting in all that work as it is running around the sports grounds. In this community we push kids to be the best sportsman. We don't care if you can read and write but hey, you can play football!'. Mrs Norton's statement reveals how the community emphasis on sport, and particular the football culture which lay at the heart of community life, was a key factor in normalising the raucous culture of the informal school culture. Here the intimate relationship between school cultures and their social and cultural context is highlighted in a way that exposes the unresolved contradiction between the formal and informal values of school.

In the informal culture of the classroom the dominance of the 'cool boys' was established by the use of an exaggerated form of masculinity that contributed to a chaotic atmosphere where any sense of organisation appeared to evaporate. Whilst the extract from the field diary below

is from an observation of a Year 8 class working in one of the school's common areas, it captures how chaos was a key device used to destabilise the cultural capital of the school:

The noise strikes me as I walk towards the room. There is insane laughter, yelling, loud conversations across the room, girls squealing when the boys poke them or throw something at them, mock fights, boys calling out 'fuckheads', 'fuck off', 'shut up', something being thrown, all the time someone calling out 'Ms, Ms, Ms, Ms over here, over here'. Students constantly leave their seats to have a look at what their peers are doing. Boys are chasing each other. One boy, Luke, is suddenly deeply concentrated. Then he jumps out of his chair, arms in the air, yelling 'hey look at this, look at this' and five boys jump out of their chairs and stand around Luke, clapping and cheering, by the sight of a stick man masturbating on the computer screen.

This scenario demonstrates how the use of a particular form of cultural capital is used to de-privilege the hierarchies valued by the school. The chaos that is the key principle driving this value reversal resembles the scenario on the sports field presented above, in that action appears chaotic but is essentially heavily structured and underpinned by a series of techniques and tactics. These were employed to gain honours and privileges, and aimed at constructing relationships of superiority and inferiority.

Social positioning within the student hierarchy was achieved through the use of a highly physical performance, involving competitiveness and aggression, combined with gross humour, as this scenario of the informal culture of the classroom shows:

As Ms Dawson is explaining what the class is going to do in the lesson, Robert, Ralph and Ryan start mock fighting, loudly joking, pretending to throw heavy punches at each other, most of which are suspended just before they make contact with the receiver. Billy, Bruce and Connor have now noticed the fight and join in. Mrs Dawson, manages to stop the fight. Suddenly Ralph yells out, 'move out of the way, Harry, your nose is so fucking big, we can't see anything else'. This triggers hysterical laughter. Nick, Thomas and William are also laughing, but their laughter is mechanical and their faces expressionless. Harry, who has been standing at the front of the class in line to talk to Mrs Dawson, silently walks back to his chair, red-faced, silenced and obviously hurt (field notes).

In the informal school context social honour was achieved by playing on hegemonic masculinity. This revolved around boisterous and offensive behaviour towards other young women and young men considered to be engaged in non-standard forms of masculinity. The use of ridicule, shaming and sarcasm were frequently used to signal one's status in the social hierarchy whilst at other times this behaviour was embodied through mastery of actions such as punching, throwing and yelling. Control over the physical capacities of the body was ultimately proved by the precision with which actions were carried out to symbolically demonstrate physical strength and power, whilst not always causing physical harm. For example, the frequently occurring quick punch, suspended centimetres from the receiver, became a symbol of engagement with dominant practices, highlighting Connell's (1995: 61) idea of body reflexive practices and the use of the body as both object and agent in the construction of masculinity. The situational nature of the dominant practices at Hillsville High is illuminated in the importance placed on precision skills rather than mere physical power; this bears a resemblance to the physical aspect of the rural habitus which for some young men was ultimately demonstrated through their shooting skills. Engagement in these practices ranged from active involvement, which included the participation of academically successful individuals, to bystander behaviour. Regardless of the degree of involvement, most young men were interested in being paid the patriarchal dividend associated with this form of masculinity in order to avoid the harassment that Harry experienced in the above extract.

Physically and verbally aggressive actions were habitually used to signal attachment to the dominant student group, and were also used as a means to maintain control and status within this group. A story from the field notes describing Robert's increasing admiration for Bruce, a member of the 'wannabes', and Ralph's resistance to Bruce's gradual inclusion in the 'cool boys' demonstrates how physical aggression is used to guard membership in the group. In the middle of a lesson Bruce walks in to the classroom after having been to the library and takes Ralph's seat and starts talking to Robert. When Ralph realises that Bruce is sitting in his seat he thunders furiously from the other end of the room 'get the fuck away from my chair you creep' whilst running towards Bruce with his fist in the air. This response triggers Bruce's immediate withdrawal from the situation, and obviously embarrassed and defeated he returns to his seat without looking at Ralph.

Verbally and physically aggressive performances were regularly combined with sexualised actions as a powerful source of control. This extract from the field diary demonstrates how

sexualised tactics were used to maintain boundaries within the two dominant groups and reinforce personal status within the ‘cool boys’:

A mock fight develops and a pen is thrown around. Robert yells ‘it’s pubic, it’s pubic, watch out guys’ and Ralph immediately answers ‘stick it back up’. In the spirit of the moment Connor grabs the pen and throws it at Robert who angrily places his hands around his penis while moving his pelvis backwards and forward, moving towards Connor whilst stating ‘you are lucky I didn’t seminate [sic] on you’. Ralph smiles sarcastically, the other boys are quiet, Connor blushes, avoids Robert’s stare and looks down at the table. Mrs Dawson tells the boys to do their work. I’m not sure how much of the scene Mrs Dawson saw or overheard, but she did see the last bit of it. I feel quite uncomfortable with the scene and puzzled the behaviour isn’t explicitly confronted (field notes).

Through heavily sexualised language and body language, the leader of the cool boys, Robert, is instantly able to seize power and put a stop to any kind of challenge to his position, no matter how small, in the masculine hierarchy. The absence of any kind of explicit challenging of Robert’s behaviour from students or Mrs Dawson further strengthens the power of his actions. The lack of questioning of the appropriateness of Robert’s sexualised behaviour works to normalise it, and confirms the status of highly physical and sexualised actions as a dominant currency in the informal school culture. The use of sexual tactics in signalling attachment to a particular hegemonic archetype or resisting school authority has been outlined in some studies (Kessler et al. 1985; Kimmel and Messner 1989; Walkerdine 1990; Willis 1977). However, the repeated simulations of grossly exaggerated sexual acts point to the significance of the intersection of class, gender and rurality in the construction of the culturally exalted (Connell 2005) form of masculinity performed at Hillsville High. This construction was further helped by the complicity of teachers who often remained silent rather than confronting the behaviours described above.

Positioning within the cool boys and wannabes was also heavily centred on proving sexual attractiveness and prowess. A couple of different extracts from the field diary tell the story of Susan, a quiet girl, who at this stage of the data collection is moving between the quiet girls’ group and the cool girls’ group because she has caught the attention of the cool boys. The beginning of Susan’s involvement with the cool boys is marked by intense competition for her attention between Ralph and Robert. In one instance Ralph and Robert move over to

Susan's table. Ralph starts touching her hair and says to her 'I love your hair, it's so soft'. Susan mumbles 'thanks'. The other boys at the nearby table chuckle nearly inaudibly and exchange glances. Ralph says 'No, I'm serious' which finally makes Susan produce a smile, but as soon as she reacts with any emotional sincerity to Ralph's advances Ralph, Robert and the others burst out laughing.

The competition between Ralph and Robert soon intensifies and the methods they employ to attract Susan's attention change to resemble a form of 'predatory attitude' (Connell et al. 1982: 114):

The boys pretend to be doing their school work but they are making some kind of a list contained the names of girls they consider sluts. Incidentally Susan enters the room to ask Ms Willis a question. As she stands there waiting for Ms Willis' attention Ralph and Robert start fighting for her attention: 'how are you today Susan?' 'how's the pain' (she must have got hurt somehow). Susan seems overwhelmed about all the attention. In a concerned tone of voice Robert says 'hang on Susan...there's a bit of grass there on your leg'. Susan looks surprised and thanks Robert. Robert reaches out his hand, and as he pretends to brush grass off her knee, he makes a quick move up her leg and firmly grabs her bottom. Susan looks shocked and embarrassed and moves away, as close to Ms Willis, who is still talking to another student, as she can. The boys laugh out loudly and exchange glances and high fives are given between Robert and Ryan (field notes).

Competing for female attention worked as a form of bonding within the cool boys' group and to a lesser extent for the wannabes, which reinforced their dominant status in the masculine hierarchy. This often took the form of sexual ridicule, as in Susan's case where the rendering of her as a powerless sex object served the purpose of confirming the dominant position of the young men as a group. The scenario outlining Ralph's and Robert's efforts at getting Susan's attention has strong connotations with a scripted play: their playful exchanges of habituated gestures and lines; the jovial atmosphere created through the use of humour to play with meanings and hierarchies, and ultimately confirm a particular worldview. The use of familiar language and jokes confirms the predefined value placed on certain acts and behaviours that afford privilege and status in Hillsville's culturally exalted form of masculinity. This use of exaggerated language and behaviors enabled the cool boys and wannabes to subvert the hierarchy of knowledge at the school and exert power over both students and teachers through raucous and sexualised behavior and language.

Although Susan chose to end her engagement with Robert's and Ralph's advances and firmly position herself in the quiet girls' group, there were other young women who made the decision to become further involved with some of the young men. The sanctions applied to these young women when the relationships ended were often severe and reflect the stories of labelling and exclusion in the community explored in the previous chapter. The similarities between complicity in the sport/masculinity dynamic in the community and in the school context highlight the connection between the school and its social context, and the unique factors involved in shaping the student hierarchy at Hillsville High. The strict exclusion of Wendy from the cool girls after she became involved with Robert for a short time before breaking up again demonstrates the severe social isolation some young women suffered from their friendship groups as well as from the boys they were sexually engaged with. My last memory of Wendy is of her sitting on a rock on her own during the school's final Year 10 picnic, and everyone else refusing to acknowledge her. The comment offered by Mr Fielding that 'those girls are such drama queens' expresses how teachers tended to downplay the significance of power and exclusion in the informal student hierarchy, and how this made them compliant in maintaining the existing dynamics.

Sexual acts were also used to directly demarcate and protect the cornerstone of hegemonic masculinity – heterosexuality – by clearly defining it against homosexuality (Anderson 2009; Connell 2005; Pascoe 2007). A regular occurrence, especially in the student breaks, was the imitation of gay sex, largely involving wannabes gyrating their hips behind each other or jumping on each other's back. Sometimes this played out subtly and quietly with only two individuals involved as a form of male bonding and an implied reinforcement of one's subscription to heterosexual relationships. At other times the performance was a macabre spectacle involving cheering spectators and actors violently exaggerating the sexual imitation in their bodily movements; this had the purpose of displaying a highly physical enactment of masculinity in order to denigrate homosexuality. These performances of the superiority of a particular form of masculinity based on physical strength and performance and heterosexuality shed some light on the experiences of marginalised young men in small close-knit communities, and link with observations on the higher male suicide rates in rural areas (Bourke 2003; Graham 1994).

Contrary to common explanations for masculine performances as 'hormones' or 'boys being boys', participant observations confirm the importance of peer relations in learning masculinity (Gilbert and Gilbert 1998; Mac an Ghaill 1994). They particularly shed some

light upon the construction of the culturally exalted form of masculinity practised at Hillsville High. Sarah's comment, for example, that 'the boys used to be okay in Grade 7 and 8. I used to talk to Nick all the time but I can't now' suggests their gradual exposure to and inclusion in a particular masculine hierarchy. The importance of adhering to certain practices in this hierarchy is explained by Rose and Trudy in their observation that 'The other day this guy helped this girl who was really upset. He had his arm around her and everything and it was so sweet...but as soon as they're together in the classroom everything changes'. The need to underplay emotions and feelings mirrors observations of young men in other school settings (Jackson and Dempster 2009; Martino). However, whilst Rose's and Trudy's description of the change of behaviour in a group setting indicates the young men's active engagement with the dominant construction of masculinity to gain status and prestige, the lack of maintenance of these behaviours outside the group setting also suggests a need to connect with alternative ways of expressing maleness.

Domination, subordination and the legitimisation of hegemonic masculine practices

The carry-over of a highly physical form of hegemonic masculinity into the informal school culture meant that conflicting messages about desirable behaviours were present in the school environment. The assumption that raucous and aggressive behaviours were associated with 'boys being boys' and 'hormones' meant that these behaviours were normalised in the school context and the need to critically scrutinise them was perceived to be superfluous. The understanding by many students that boisterous and sometimes violent behaviours were normal and appropriate for young men, the School's endorsement of this through the use of sport as a reward and teachers' lack of power to challenge this behaviour connect with Youdell's (2006) theory on how student behaviours and experiences are simultaneous constructed by students and teachers. The moment to moment interactions that took place between students and teachers in the classroom, in lunch breaks and on the sports field contributed to maintaining dominant beliefs about gendered behaviours.

There were aspects of the culturally exalted form of masculinity practiced at Hillsville High that were specifically linked to the young people's rural habitus. The valorisation of a masculinity based on highly physical performances was especially pronounced in the school context through the reinforcement of these behaviours in the field of sport. Whilst the link between the production of masculinities through sport in an educational setting is far from

new (Swain 2006a and b; Keddie 2007), the location of the school in a small rural town, in which social and cultural capital was based on sport, points to the importance of the intersection between class, gender and rurality in the construction of a particular form of masculinity. Highly exaggerated physical and sexual acts may thus be seen as expressions of the gendered aspect of the rural habitus, amplified through the valorisation of sport in the community, the dearth of alternative forms of self-expression in Hillsville and the prevalence of homophobia in rural areas.

Conflicting messages about desirable behaviours in the school context were further complicated by the cool boys' success in inverting the hierarchy of knowledge through their performances in the informal school culture. Their almost scripted performances indicate how engagement in certain acts imbued with predetermined meanings and values was used to compete for the patriarchal dividend. Grotesque and exaggerated performances worked to facilitate a chaotic atmosphere in the school environment, which in turn worked to undermine the authority of the cultural capital of the school.

Liberating the assumptions of the dominant culture within the school was also achieved through the use of language, especially humour, sarcasm and sexism. The more macabre, the louder and more exaggerated the language, the greater the chance of destabilising the cultural capital valued by the school and silencing its authority. These findings bear some resemblance to dynamics observed in other social environments, such as Thomson's (1997) study of the link between violence and alcohol in a pub milieu, but the use of sexual tactics used in inverting the cultural hierarchy was particularly striking in this study. The highly sexualised nature of both physical performances and language was used to maintain boundaries within and between student groups, as well as being a powerful tool to silence the authority of teachers.

The consequences of subordination were severe for many young people. The messages on the penalties relating to non-conformity to normative forms of masculinity which were distributed on a daily basis through jokes and aggressive acts such as violent imitations of gay sex worked to ensure that most young men positioned themselves within the wannabes. Young men who were labelled 'nerds' as well as young men from the ghetto people were continuously singled out to maintain the boundaries in the student hierarchy. In a similar manner young women were reminded of their subordinate status through humiliation and sexual objectification. Teachers' lack of acknowledgement of the role of the cool boys' and

wannabes' sexual and aggressive behaviours in the marginalisation of other students also contributed to the maintenance of the gendered power dynamics. The labelling of the cool girls as 'drama queens' clearly reflects the complicity of teachers in the construction of gendered forms of domination and subordination at the school.

The carry-over of a community cultural capital centred on physical performances into the school environment sheds some light on the normalisation of a highly physical form of masculinity in Hillsville High's informal school culture and its dominant status in the student hierarchy. The stark contrast between the normalisation of this form of behavior and the school's implementation of gender specific programs to target these behaviours may be explained by conflicting messages about desirable behaviors promoted by formal education policies and those valued in the community. This tension also goes some way to explain the lack of success of the implementation of policies designed to limit the effect of rurality on educational decision making (Marks and Mcmillan 2003; Panizzon and Pegg 2007) because community beliefs and attitudes may sometimes be more powerful than the norms promoted by formal education policies.

Chapter 7: Experiences of education

It's just how it works (Rose and Trudy).

Introduction

This chapter further develops the insights about the dynamics operating in the informal school culture which were established in the previous chapter by exploring these dynamics from the perspective of the young people themselves. I argue that the anti-intellectual and anti-authoritarian behaviours that were shown to dominate the informal school culture co-exist with a desire on the part of many young men to engage with the formal curriculum. I highlight how difficulties in doing so are linked to aspects of these young men's rural habitus, especially to their relationship with a physical culture and a place-based form of hegemonic masculinity. I further argue that the dominance of the culturally exalted hierarchy in the informal school culture strongly influenced the experiences of education of other student groups, limiting their opportunities for engagement with the formal curriculum and leading to a sense of disillusionment with the purpose of schooling.

The cool boys and wannabes: Experiences of failure

Reflecting the findings of Australian and international research on the educational experiences of young men (Kessler et al. 1985; Mac an Ghail 1994; Smyth et al. 2000, 2004; Willis 1977), the belief that intellectual labour was less valuable than a physical performance provided the young men in this study with a justification for rejecting schoolwork. John asserted that teachers' work 'isn't real work... I mean they do stuff but it's not real work, physical work'. Ralph elaborated on this idea in his account of wanting to leave school to take up manual work because 'I always knew school was not for me. I wanted to go out and earn money rather than going to school and get into trouble. Most of us were always pretty sure that we wanted to get out, earn money and get a life'. These accounts indicate that many young men brought with them to school expectations to leave the education system as soon as possible. Comments such as 'getting into trouble at school' and 'getting out of school to get a life' suggest that they experienced school as an alien and oppressive environment whose requirements for intellectual performance were at odds with their self-identity and their aspirations to establish their independence in the 'real world' of manual labour.

Feelings of alienation from schooling were further strengthened by many of the young men's understandings that an important part of the School's attempt to empower them was to mould them into urban, middle class standards. Language formed an especially important part of this process: the abstract and explicit form of language valued by the school is in stark contrast to the language use the young men had internalised through their rural habitus. Although a more implicit and shorthand form of communication that emphasised informality, familiarity and concrete, physical knowledge was a key aspect of the rural habitus, it was used more prominently by the young men than the young women. Through their encounter with the formal education system and its expectation of students to be able to explain and elaborate on their ideas the young men were confronted with the shortcomings of their own language.

During the participant observation I frequently encountered the phrase 'you know what I mean...' in conversations with the young men. Whilst this demonstrates the assumption that particular meanings were understood by the group engaging in conversation (Bourdieu 1990; Bernstein 1990a), it was also a substitute phrase for not being able to articulate these meanings further. For example, in a conversation about experiences of schooling Gary struggled to convey to me that he would have liked to do better at school, and concludes 'you know what I mean'. My lack of understanding triggered the following statements 'Yeah...don't really know...I don't know how to say it...I'm stuck'. Gary's comments on 'don't know how to say it' and 'being stuck' encapsulate the responses of many young men and connect with Bourdieu's (1990) notion that a 'pure and correct language' is needed for educational success. The young men's experiences highlight how their use of a form of language based on shared understandings rather than abstract knowledge often contributed to their own perception and that of others that they were inarticulate

Constructions of the young men as inarticulate took place through their interaction with school staff, but also through the knowledge valued by the formal curriculum such as spelling tests because of the association with a certain form of capital that did not form part of the young men's habitus. An extract from the field diary describes one such test which 'includes 20 words such as superintendent and summon. During the test Phillip exclaims that he is not going to get more than 5/20 and Gary replies that he will be lucky to get 3/20. In the end John gets 9/20, Gary 10/20, Paul 3/20 and Phillip 6/20'. Again, the young men actively participate in the construction of themselves as inarticulate by suggesting that they do not possess this particular form of knowledge. This was reinforced by their teachers, with Mrs Anderson explaining that 'I have noticed that sometimes the kids don't understand the words I use, like

“restricted” for example. So now I’m in the habit of always saying “do you know what this word means”. The expected use of abstract and complex language at the school compounded the young men’s feelings of being in a foreign environment, leading to further detachment from the cultural capital of the school.

The expected adherence to middle class capital was further reinforced in the construction of students as independent and self-motivated learners through the neoliberal assumptions underpinning the curriculum (Olsen, Codd and O’Neill 2004; Woodman and Wyn 2013). Mrs Willis contends that because students can pursue individual interests through individually designed projects, ‘They are more engaged in this way and they can work at their own pace’. Her comments indicate that self-paced and self-motivated work is a preferred work form at the school and perceived to be a key contributor to the development of self-responsibility. Many young men supported this idea and wanted ‘to be listened to’, ‘to have more freedom’ or wanted ‘to have more influence on the work we do’. However, contradictory statements such as ‘we want more guidelines and explanation’, ‘we want more discipline’ or ‘we want to be pushed to do our best’ point to an understanding that being an independent learner required a certain cultural capital based on individuality and which was at odds with the collective nature of the rural habitus and the associated unambiguous identity. For example, Nick and Thomas explain that the chaotic classroom scenarios that often unfolded during individual project time happened because ‘teachers just expect us to do the work without explaining’. This suggests that the independent and self-paced learning that was designed to motivate and engage students operated as a form of symbolic violence through naturalising a particular form of cultural capital and ignoring other factors influencing the young men’s educational engagement. Nick’s questioning of the meritocratic principles of schooling suggests that these groups of young men shared an understanding that their rural habitus hindered them from participating in academic activities despite their desire to do so, confirming their aspirations to manifest their identity in the realm of manual labour.

The young men’s response to their experiences that educational success meant becoming somebody else and taking on the middle class cultural capital favoured by the school increased their sense of being in an alien environment. Nick states that ‘teachers are biased when they advise us what to do [continue on to further education and training]’ and Robert says that ‘Now you have more options than ages ago but it’s still kind of narrow in the way you have to think and you have to get a good mark. I don’t kind of agree with the teachers’ judgement of how smart you are and they write that on a piece of paper and that’s supposed

to set you up for the rest of your life. And that's what we're told, if we don't get something good on that piece of paper at the end of Grade 10 then we're just going to be retards for the rest of our lives'. The young men's response to their feelings of being stigmatised because of their cultural capital, in combination with their own valorisation of practices associated with hegemonic masculinity, triggered a rebellion against the urban, middle class values represented by the school. Through the use of the young men's own cultural capital, the school's hierarchy of knowledge could be subverted through the embodied practice of a particular kind of hegemonic masculinity. Through these practices alternative kinds of social honours and male mateship could be established, especially through sexualised humour which worked to establish control over other students and the authority of the school and teachers.

These experiences of being in a foreign environment led to the physical performances that permeated the informal school culture. However, commitment to these kinds of masculine enactments was not experienced as unproblematic but coexisted with an acceptance that education contributed to a rewarding career. This acceptance was linked to the perception of the school as a supportive environment because of the close relationships between teachers and students and their embedding in the close-knit nature of the community. This positive aspect of small town social relationships is captured in common statements such as 'we get to know the teachers outside school...they are more like friends to us' and 'the teachers just want the best for us'. It was through these relationships formed with teachers that many young men had become acutely aware of the importance of educational credentials for their future careers in a post-industrial economy.

As their final year of compulsory schooling came to a close, some of the physically assertive boys had decided to 'pull [themselves] together', and attempted to engage with the knowledges and practices of the formal curriculum. For some young men, experiences in the labour market reinforced the importance of education for socially and economically rewarding careers. For Paul, a conscious decision to leave his education to spend a prolonged period of time to work 'on the farm of a friend of my dad's' resulted in experiences of exploitation and physical exhaustion because 'I had to get up at 4am every morning and they paid me very little'. Despite a strong desire to embrace the formal curriculum, difficulties in engaging with this often resulted in feelings of inadequacy and powerlessness:

Paul tells me it is important to him to have a good resume he can show to future employers. He shows me a book on resume writing distributed to all the students to help them describe their employability skills, including team-working, self-motivation and problem solving skills. Paul is not sure how to address those criteria, but he tries to write a few sentences. After a while he hammers his hands in the keyboard and yells out 'this is shit, I don't need to do this'. Soon he throws his chair back, walks off, slamming the door, kicking a chair, loudly swearing as he exits the room (field notes).

Paul's experience of his attempt to engage with the school's expectation to the students to engage in the 'project of the self' (Giddens 1991) through resume writing was associated with feelings of failure. A common response to those feelings was the assertion of hegemonic masculinity, as demonstrated by Paul who 'throws his chair back', 'slams the door' and swears loudly as he gives up on the task he is working on. Frequently the response to experiences of failure also included a sense of personal failure, captured in statements such as 'I'm so dumb' (Phillip) or 'you're wasting your time trying to explain that to me' (Gary). Their response to the symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1990) facilitating their feelings of failure was a mixture of self-blame and resistance through the familiar practices associated with working class masculinity. The scenario presented above bears some resemblance to other accounts of masculinity and schooling in the connection between failure and engagement with 'the mask of masculinity' (Pollack 1998) to hide fears and vulnerabilities. It differs, however, insofar as many young men in this study were explicit about these fears and openly confronted teachers about them in statements such as 'I'm so dumb' (Phillip).

Considering the young men's experiences of failure and disconnect from the academic curriculum it is perhaps not surprising that their answers to the question 'what have you learnt during your time in high school' overwhelmingly centred on the importance of social relations rather than curriculum content. The statement 'I have learnt to get along with different people' and 'to follow instructions' was made by the majority of the young men, and it was often highlighted that these 'people skills' would help them to obtain employment in the local labour market. These views were accompanied by a belief that obtaining the Year 10 certificate was sufficient to gain employment.

The young men's emphasis on hierarchical relationships in the workplace has a striking resemblance to Bowles and Gintis's hidden curriculum thesis (1976), but conflicts with their lack of enactment of this in the school environment. The importance attributed to 'Getting

along with everyone' reflects the unique role of the young men's rural habitus in shaping their educational experiences. Through aspects of their rural habitus, especially the unambiguous identity, the young men had internalised a strong sense of fulfilling their gendered roles in the community in terms of engaging with manual labour. The importance placed on social interaction in the school context, rather than a focus on curriculum context, was seen as a way to maintain high levels of social capital to increase work opportunities in their local community.

Whilst for many cool boys and the wannabes the difficulties in engaging with the formal curriculum resulted in a detachment from the cultural capital of the school, there were a few who were culturally omnivorous in their ability to play the game, pretending to care little about schoolwork while still succeeding academically. Thomas notes that 'Bruce knows all the terms 'cause his dad is a businessman and he works all over the world. Bruce goes and sees him everywhere so he's got all that knowledge but doesn't work very hard, he just mucks around with Robert and them all the time'. Whilst Bruce was able to earn status and local credentials through his rural habitus, at the same time his social and cultural capital, which extended far beyond Hillsville, assisted him in negotiating the academic curriculum successfully and earning credentials for performing an 'effortless masculinity' (Jackson and Hempster 2009) or 'contrived carelessness' (Morris 2012b). These observations highlight Youdell's notion that for some students 'it might be all but impossible...to be recognised, or recognisable, as learners in schools' (2006: 96). Through the use of language, body language, interactions with peers and teachers some of the young men in this study were constituted and constituted themselves as 'bad' or 'inappropriate' learners.

Cool girls: 'It's just how it works'

The invisible and passive position assumed by the majority of the young women in the classroom resembled a form of subordinated femininity (Connell 2005). However, adherence to this kind of femininity was experienced differently by the cool girls and the quiet girls, and their concerns with issues such as sexualisation, body image, relationships and lack of opportunity to engage with academic studies reflect how they also employed power feminism and DIY and Grrrlpower feminism in their identity construction (Aapola, Gonick and Harris 2005).

The cool girls' relationship with the formal curriculum can be described in terms of Ringrose's (2007) concept of 'the successful girl', an idea used to reflect the increasing

educational success of young women in late modern societies. My own initial observations during the participant observation confirmed the cool girls' engagement with their academic studies, and this observation was supported by the perceptions of teachers who said they achieved good or excellent results and would definitely be enrolling at the nearest regional college after Year 10. Initially the young women themselves said that they mostly 'enjoyed studying' (Rose) and 'liked most teachers' (Trudy).

Despite positive experiences of their academic study, the cool girls mostly associated being at school with emotional turmoil and marginalisation. The reasons for this were linked to the social dynamics of the informal school culture, especially the young women's experiences of gossiping and competition for the status associated with dating the cool boys. Rose's and Trudy's explanation that 'working every day is one thing, then there's all the bitchiness' sheds light upon the nature of these young women's experiences of schooling. The presence of 'bitchiness' in the informal school culture was pervasive and included losing 'friendships and then another friendship because a girl goes out with someone and they break up and another girl goes out with him and everyone is upset' (Trudy), and dealing with internal division and tension between groups that caused 'some friends to stay on one side and others on another side and it's just stupid' (Rose). The young women's response to these experiences – 'How many years have we been here? It is time to have break' – indicates a sense of exhaustion derived from the involvement in the divisions and tensions associated with complicity in the masculine hierarchy.

The social and emotional consequences of gendered processes of inclusion and exclusion in both the school and community culture are vividly demonstrated by Debbie in her recollection of how she became ostracised and isolated from her friends:

The counsellor made me look like a total idiot, saying that there's nothing to worry about and now everyone will go around saying that I'm stupid. I haven't spoken to any of my friends for months now. Do you know what happened? Well, my boyfriend and my friend kissed one day and then my friend blamed me because I had been spending time with her boyfriend but we were just really good friends. Now no one talks to me. And I used to be best friends with Wendy, Susan and Rose and Trudy but they're all gossiping about me and they tell everyone that I'm a skank. I can't even walk up the main street anymore. Everyone looks at me and some people will shout at me and call me names like slut and stuff. I have actually made up with one friend. But that's a

different story. She kissed my boyfriend right in front of me once. Anyway now we have made up but I can't hang out too much with her 'cause she's got a bit of a reputation and so everyone will say the same things about me if I spend too much time with her.

In the school environment the internal division and tension frequently led to some girls' exclusion from their own friendship groups because once they were labelled sluts other peers tended to also exclude them to avoid the embarrassment of association with the stigmatised girls. Not only were the cool girls at risk of being labelled 'slut' by their friends but they were also at risk of being rejected by the boys they were sexually engaged with. The risks in being labelled 'slut' and suffering stigmatisation and exclusion that lie at the heart of the divisions and tensions experienced by this group of young women connect with the form of predatory attitude (Connell et al. 1982: 114) displayed in the story of Ralph's and Robert's competition for Susan's attention, outlined in the previous chapter. The cool girls' stories of the presence of this predatory attitude suggest that it is a key factor underpinning their experiences of education. Debbie's story highlights the conformity/rejection dilemma for women in constituting dominant masculinities (Mac an Ghaill 1994; Levy 2005), yet it also problematises this in a rural context of high social capital, a cultural capital valorising a hegemonic form of masculinity and few alternative contexts for self-expression. For Debbie, these experiences resulted in social and educational withdrawal; the efforts of the school and Debbie's mother to persuade her to go back to School proved unsuccessful because Debbie was portrayed as an 'idiot' and 'stupid' and the actual dynamics influencing her withdrawal were ignored.

The young women's stories of the tensions and conflicts dominating the informal school culture, including their negotiations to remain in the cool group whilst also maintaining their friendships with peers, illuminate their experiences of social control as being intensified in the school environment. Trudy states that 'it's a lot worse here at school when we're all together'. Rose says that 'I'm very self-conscious. I don't want to get there [to school] and think "do I look fat here?" or "does this look bad?" I'm always worried about what I look like at school'. She continues, 'When I'm at home I get out of the shower, don't do my hair, don't put makeup on, old jeans and shirt and that's who I am'. Trudy joins in the conversation, commenting that 'when I go to your house it's so relaxing 'cause I always put makeup on but when you're at Rose's place you don't worry about it, you put on old farm clothes and Blundstones. It's more natural'. This constant act of reflexivity and need to balance different roles resulted in a heightened form of self-monitoring and self-regulation that presented as

masquerading in Hillsville's different social spaces. The effect of hegemonic masculinity on social relations was described by these young women as generating feelings of behaving in unauthentic ways which conflicted with their subjective views of their sense of self. Whilst the young women appeared to comply with Hillsville's dominant constructions of gender, their concerns reflect the importance of other forms of femininity such as power feminism and DIY and Grrrlpower feminism in their lives (Aapola, Gonick and Harris 2005).

Quiet girls: 'We just sit here all day'

Like the cool girls, the quiet girls can be firmly placed in the successful girls' (Ringrose 2007) category: teachers' accounts of their academic performance were positive, and there were perceptions that they were continuing on to college. As with the cool girls, the quiet girls' account of their conformity to a form of emphasised femininity revealed tensions and conflicts. However, unlike the cool girls, the quiet girls' experiences of education were to a greater degree characterised by the impact of hegemonic masculinity within the classroom on their academic experiences rather than on their social experiences. Many of these young women had placed themselves outside the parameters of hegemonic masculinity and were not actively partaking in the competitions for honours and prestige.

Anne, Anita and Nina sum up their concerns about not being able to engage with their academic studies because of their experiences of existing on the 'periphery of classroom life' (Stanworth 1983):

Anne: Well...it's just, you know. We just SIT there every lesson. We like the schoolwork but all the teachers can do is to run after those boys. Sometimes you would just like to talk to the teacher and get some help...or just talk to them.

Anita: There's so much noise...I can never concentrate. I just sit there and get more and more tired.

Nina: [nodding] Yeah, yeah.

Anne: The boys...they're just ARGHGH.

Anita: Sometimes I just do my work at home.

MS: Do you mean homework?

Anita: No, I mean the work we are doing at school. I can't focus at school...in class someone will be running around or maybe you are hit with something and if you need to ask about something you never get the chance so you wait all lesson. So I just do my work at home.

Experiences of marginalisation in the classroom through disruptions to their schoolwork and feelings of being ignored and dominated resulted in feelings of anger and frustration for many quiet girls. Maggie and Susan, for example, mirror the frustration of Anne, Anita and Nina in their statements that 'the noise is disturbing and it's difficult to concentrate (Maggie)' and 'they [the boys] jump on the desk or throw chairs across the room or tables. Sometimes it gets annoying when you think someone is going to get hurt' (Susan). These experiences of marginalisation as a result of the young men's interactions with each other in the classroom contributed to feelings of resentment towards the young men because the quiet girls felt dominated in the classroom and thwarted in their academic success. These experiences reflect findings from other studies documenting young women's difficulties in engaging with their studies in classrooms dominated by hegemonic forms of masculinity (Lees 1997; Dalley-Trim 2009). In connecting with this body of literature, this study problematises the relatively uncomplicated media debate on the role of feminism in creating 'the successful girl' (Ringrose 2007) and propelling boys into disadvantage (Hayes and Lingaard 2003). This is particularly evident in the exposure of the persistence of some critical social equity concerns that the reductionism of this debate has silenced.

A critical concern about the educational experiences of this group of young women was their experience of bullying, which was almost always sexualised. These experiences are representative of a large body of literature documenting the sexual harassment of young women in schools (Francis and Skelton 2005; Keddie 2009; Kenway and Willis 1998; Kenway and Fitzclarence 1997). In general, the young women were often subjected to sexualised comments or handling of their bodies, shown in comments such as 'commenting on breasts or bottoms' (Sarah) or 'having my bra strops pulled' (Tracy). Attempts to challenge the young men's dominance in the classroom were rare, and almost always met with a sexualised response designed to render the young women as powerless sex objects. For example, Sarah's decision to ask the young men to be quiet generated this response from Colin:

Why weren't you in PE today? Did you jump the fence and did it really quickly with someone and thought that no one would know? But we can all see your hair is messed up, you can't hide it, you fucking whore, you have fucking hair'. Sarah is embarrassed, looks down at her work, red faced. There is widespread laughter across the room. Lauren, Sarah's best friend and neighbour, does not look at Sarah, and Megan and Erin, sitting at the table next to Sarah and Lauren, appear to be deeply concentrated on their work (field notes).

Colin's immediate construction of Sarah as a 'whore' worked to silence her critique of the existing social order as well as a reminder to the rest of the young women of their place in the hierarchy. The silencing of Sarah's critique through sexual ridicule and humiliation and the prevention of any communication or expressions of solidarity between the young women bears a close resemblance to the experience of the cool girls: that the masculine hierarchy worked to alienate them from their peers, thus highlighting the role of hegemonic masculinity in shaping the educational experiences of the young women.

Whilst the young women's experiences of sexual harassment resemble the experiences of other young women in different geographic locations, the particular experiences of the quiet girls were also rooted in the unique rural context of Hillsville. For example, Sarah, Maggie and Kristin expressed anger that one young woman was repeatedly sexually harassed because of the size of her breasts. They complained that 'we have this girl in our class, and all the guys call her "milk" and make fun of her... (Maggie) and 'I find that wrong... It distracts everyone else in the class' (Sarah). Kristin continues, 'the other day they drew a horrible cow on the white board and they didn't get in trouble and they were being so horrible to her'. The attempt to dehumanise and humiliate this young woman by constructing her as 'a milk producing cow' is strongly linked to Hillsville's geographic location and the prevalence of the primary industries in the area. This example highlights the tensions between many young women's performances of invisible femininity despite their opposition to many of the practices associated with hegemonic masculinity. The story furthermore suggests that many young men's specific experiences with physical work in the primary industries influenced their masculinities in particular ways. This included the creation of a particular vocabulary that is used to strengthen the dominance of hegemonic masculinity in the cultural hierarchy through the use of sexualised and dehumanising humour, such as likening women to animals.

The image of the cow, for example, was used to immediately conjure up images of oversized breasts and reproductive organs.

The powerlessness of teachers in establishing a supportive learning environment for the quiet girls meant that this group of girls felt a sense of resentment towards the school and its teachers. Although they 'liked their teachers', they simultaneously expressed the view that 'all they can do is to run around after those boys' (Anne). The importance of personal relationships in establishing positive experiences of schooling (Lingaard et al. 2002) was especially evident in the quiet girls' desire to have more personal contact with their teachers, as Anne demonstrated in her statement above ('Sometimes you would just like to talk to the teacher and get some help...or just talk to them'). Indeed, many of the young women's perception of a good teacher was a teacher who 'would take the time to come and talk to us' (Emily), but the lack of this interaction highlights their invisibility in the classroom (Swann 1992). The young women's response to their invisible status in the classroom was a feeling of being ignored and unappreciated despite their intellectual efforts and academic success.

The young women's feelings of being ignored were also related to their perception that teachers were sometimes complicit in the sexualised dynamics used by the cool boys and wannabes to ensure their conformity to an emphasised form of femininity. A scenario from the field diary detailing a young girl's plea for her teacher to help her get her belongings back from a young man pretending to masturbate on them demonstrates the lack of significance attributed to the power dynamics taking place at the school. Ms Carpenter's reply to the girl's plea for help – 'what am I supposed to do? Go and pin him down? We're better off to ignore him and let him wear himself out' – points to the helplessness of teachers in dealing with these dynamics. Both Ms Carpenter's reply and other teachers' comments that 'boys are more out there' (Ms Dawson) and 'boys are more verbal' (Mrs Willis) furthermore point to the normalisation of 'boys being boys' and the belief that biology cannot be changed.

The young women's resentment towards teachers stemmed from this unresponsiveness to sexualised, physical or verbal bullying, but also from some teachers' own acceptance of the sexually charged dynamics operating in the informal school culture. Susan's comment about a female teacher who 'doesn't dress like a teacher and she lets the boys get away with stuff but not the girls. She just laughs off the boys when they play up' suggest that some teachers were complicit in the masculine hierarchy. This observation adds to findings from other studies that largely identify the complicity of male teachers in the masculine hierarchy

through a lack of sensitivity to the sexual ridicule of young women (Keddie 2009). In this study Mr Marshall expressed the most complaints about the young men's continuous harassment of the girls and the impact this had on the young women's achievements, but found that his efforts to address this through conversations with the young people were unsuccessful because of the strong culture of physical and sexualised behaviour amongst the young males, as well as some young women. The experiences of the quiet girls that sexualised bullying was ignored and normalised, that teachers were not immune to this, and their perceptions that sexually charged language and body language could work to facilitate a bond between some teachers and young men, added to their experiences of marginalisation and resentment.

Although the cool girls, the quiet girls and the nerds had expressed strong views on the activities and behaviours associated with the cool boys in conversations about their lives in Hillsville, expressions of these views in the school context were limited due to the severe sanctions applied to anyone critiquing the masculine hierarchy. During the participant observation I did, however, witness some incidents where some young women were able to challenge the superiority of the cool boys and wannabes through the simple act of gathering together in a large group:

A large group of quiet girls and a few cool girls and ghetto people are making decorations for the final year event. Robert loudly asks Emma if she knows anyone who is better looking than him, grinning at Ralph. Emma gives him a dirty look. Anita and Anne look at me, roll their eyes and shake their heads. All these girls are not usually close friends, but being together in a close group like this seems to make them more confident. They seem happier, less tense and they make a joke of both Robert and Nigel, confirming with each other that 'those boys are idiots'. A few of them then agree that Roberts behaviour is 'disgusting'. Robert overhears this and looks stunned for a moment. Then he turns his back to the young women and continues his computer game.

The sense of solidarity and safety generated by the physical closeness of a large number of young women together in a group constituted a powerful form of resistance against the dominating behaviour of the cool boys and wannabes. The physical closeness combined with the understanding between these individuals that they shared experiences of marginalisation empowered them to express some of their resentment towards the superior groups. Such rare opportunities to express their views allowed the young women to actively and visibly resist

the masculine hierarchy in which they felt oppressed. This use of power feminism and DIY and Grrrlpower feminism (Aapola, Gonick and Harris 2005) assisted them in constructing a form of femininity outside the realm of hegemonic masculinity and maintain a sense of self preservation.

The nerds: 'We just ignore it all'

The experiences of the marginalised young men reflected their position in the masculine hierarchy, as summarised by Kenway and Willis's (1998: 103) finding that 'when girls are harassed, it is very often because they are girls, when boys are harassed it is not because they are boys but because they are the wrong kind of boys'. The labelling of the nerds because of their explicit interest in academic achievement which was perceived to be inconsistent with the characteristics of masculinity is testament to their status as the 'wrong kind of boys'. For these young men the dominance of hegemonic masculinity within the school led to a degree of disillusionment with education. Neville stated that 'There are just some idiots at the school. They think they're the top of the world. They think they're so popular, talking to everyone all the time'. Stanley observed 'They distract everyone, stop you from learning properly. They're idiots'. Neville's and Stanley's experience that marginalisation was accompanied by a sense that conformity to the rewards of doing schoolwork went unnoticed reveal how the dominance of hegemonic masculinity interfered with some students' learning needs. Their stories also start to shed some light on the experiences of the under-researched group of young men marginalised in the masculine hierarchy in schools.

Although Neville's and Stanley's feelings of marginalisation and their understanding that efforts at doing schoolwork were not rewarded were similar to the experiences of the quiet girls, their response to this did not include a sense of resentment towards the school or the teachers. On the contrary, they agreed that 'we get along really well with our teachers...it's just life when you don't get along with someone'. The young men's positive relationships with their teachers were grounded in the strong interests in academic endeavours which they shared with the teachers. Statements such as 'I love school [learning]' (Stanley) and 'you get to see how smart you really are' (Neville) permeated their discussions of their time in high school which in contrast to all other student groups did not focus on the social interactions taking place at the school but emphasised the value of the knowledge and skills they had gained. Stanley and Neville's understanding that 'some teachers will give them [the idiots] a detention...that's the only thing they really can do' highlights their view that teachers were

relatively powerless in controlling the behaviours of the cool boys and wannabes. This led them to embrace the strategy that ‘if someone is an idiot I usually just ignore them’ as a way to sustain their own construction of masculinity, which encompasses intellectualism and a love of learning.

Despite the nerds’ marginalised status, there were times when some members were able to play the game and gain some recognition from the dominant groups, although this was only possible for members whose academic endeavours were not considered too serious. For example, on a few occasions Harry played on the sexualised dynamics of domination and oppression, as this extract from the field diary illustrates: ‘[Harry] says to Robert “Robert do you mind if I take Wendy home and screw her?” Robert answers that it is not up to him. Wendy looks shocked, looking at Robert, then Harry, then at Robert again, blushing’.

Through positioning Wendy as a sex object Harry temporarily manifests a ‘hyper-sexual identity’ (Nayak and Keheli 1996: 216) that earns him a share of the patriarchal dividend. Drawing on sexualised language worked to temporarily unite some young marginalised men with the superior groups. Participation in sport was often used in a similar way to form a temporary alliance, as this description of the sports carnival highlights: ‘The two teams of Grade 10 boys get ready to pull the rope. The boys mean serious business. They are using all their strength and encourage each other to “pull harder”’. Afterwards everyone on the winning team congratulates each other on the effort, shaking hands. Even Harry is congratulated by Stephen and Ralph, who calls out ‘good efforts, boys, well done everyone’. Despite the overriding label of ‘nerd’, on some occasions individuals whose academic interest was not perceived to be too strong were able to challenge this label by participating in the practices and values associated with hegemonic masculinity in order to momentarily transcend their ‘nerd’ status and earn them some recognition by members of the dominant groups. Nevertheless, whenever members of the nerds were accepted into the groups of the cool boys and wannabes the acceptance was always one directional and not mutual.

The ghetto people: ‘They just look at us and we’re in trouble’

Although the ghetto people saw some teachers as friends it was the only group that also viewed some teachers as enemies. This view was especially fuelled by their observation that some cool boys, wannabes and cool girls were ‘teachers’ pets’, ‘posh people’ or ‘scum bags’ and were favoured by teachers. Karen expresses these views in her comment that ‘we feel like other people get away with things more than us. Like, out-there people like Stephen and

them' and Beverly clarifies 'once Peter did something and then 20 minutes later Allan did the same and Peter got a detention and Allan didn't'. This us and them mentality that characterised the 'ghetto people' stemmed particularly from their knowledge that they were a stigmatised group within the school because of their social backgrounds. The definition of other young people as 'teacher's pets', 'scumbags' and 'bitches' represented a way for these young people to symbolically reverse the cultural hierarchy at school and maintain a sense of self despite experiences of labelling and stigmatisation.

Physical resistance was also used as a means to challenge the dominance of the cool boys and wannabes in the informal school culture. For the ghetto people, verbal and physical aggression was not so much used to establish and maintain existing boundaries but rather as a form of protest masculinity (Connell 2005). This form of masculinity was used to resist the processes of stigmatisation and labelling that constructed them as 'bad people'; processes they saw as being driven largely by the cool boys, the wannabes and the cool girls. The underlying tension between these groups could erupt at any time and was most often manifested in fights sparked by seemingly insignificant and meaningless actions. For example, Peter's sudden comment to Colin in the middle of a math lesson 'what do you think you're doing? Don't look at Beverly like that', accompanied by aggressive body movements, prompted Colin, followed by John, to run to Peter's table and start fighting. Incidents like this were embedded in the social construction of the ghetto people as the underclass, which was considered incompatible with the practices of the dominant form of hegemonic masculinity. Whilst both groups drew on a physical form of masculinity to establish their power in the informal school culture, this was combined with a form of language employed to position the masculine practices of the other group as inferior.

Despite conflicts and tensions between the ghetto people, teachers and other student groups, this group of young people saw school as a safe haven away from the troubles of family life, with many members reporting that they liked school and learning. The members of the ghetto people spoke openly of some of the factors underpinning their lives and leading to the view that school was a refuge from family life. These conversations confirmed the social construction of 'being bad' in Hillsville, because of the association with poverty, unemployment and low social and geographical mobility, but they also uncovered some of the consequences for the individual members of this group living through these conditions. The conversations with members of the ghetto people revealed that they were living through severe financial, social and emotional issues, including experiences of alcohol and drug use

and domestic violence and abuse. Although the young people themselves trivialised and normalised living through these conditions, the emotional stress associated with living in a family environment characterised by conflict is linked to a lack of engagement in school studies and early school leaving (Curtis and McMillan 2008; Mance and Yu 2010; Vinson 2007; Mission Australia 2011).

Educational experiences and social and cultural capital

The experiences of engagement with the formal curriculum of the cool girls, quiet girls, nerds and ghetto people were shaped by their position in the cultural hierarchy operating in the informal school culture, but also by the nature of their family social and cultural capital. A number of quiet girls reported ‘doing my schoolwork at home’ because of the distractions in the classroom which prevented them from focusing on set tasks. Mrs Peterson confirmed this scenario and explained how the family had bought a new computer so Lauren could spend more time doing her schoolwork at home, and Mr and Mrs Conrad spoke of the need for Anita to spend time focusing on her schoolwork at home. Similarly, Neville described how he often ‘built things’ with his dad to solve mathematical problems. This focus on engaging with schoolwork at home through formal or informal activities provided some young people with a degree of protection against the difficulties in concentrating on schoolwork in the classroom.

Students whose families did not make conscious efforts to allocate time to catch up with schoolwork at home were less safeguarded against the effects of hegemonic masculinity on educational engagement and achievement. This was the case for a number of young people, such as Tina who spoke of ‘being bored at home’ or Wendy who lived with her mum and was often on her own, but was most obvious in relation to the ghetto people whose home lives were often disrupted and unstructured. In contrast to other young people who had designated times for homework after school, Erin and Megan spoke of ‘hanging around’ and Peter of ‘watching TV until late’, but reasons for doing this were bound up with escaping family conflict.

Symbolic violence and the successful girl

This account of the young people’s educational experiences suggests that one of the key factors influencing young rural men’s disengagement with schooling is the dissonance between gendered aspects of local cultural capital and the requirements of the academic curriculum. Sport was a key source of cultural capital in Hillsville and a site for the

construction and maintenance of hegemonic masculinity, with football being an especially important site for the enactment of dominant masculine practices. The carry-over of this into the school environment resulted in the valorisation of a highly physical performance and a form of anti-intellectualism which accompanied the perception that manual work was more important than intellectual work.

The co-existence of anti-intellectualism with a desire to engage with the knowledges of the formal curriculum led to a sense of failure because of the young men's understandings that to access these knowledges, which they saw as leading to desirable long-term social and economic opportunities, they had to abandon their own cultural practices associated with their rural habitus and embrace urban, middle class capitals. This sense of failure represents a form of symbolic violence in the everyday domination of urban, middle class thought, speech and behavioural patterns over the young men's rural habitus. The misrecognition of this as the natural social order forms the basis of the young men's feelings of failure and the development of an alternative culture can be understood as resistance to this form of symbolic violence.

Symbolic violence was particularly linked to the young men's performances of a form of working class masculinity and their lack of success in establishing a more metropolitan form of masculinity which they felt was needed to engage with the formal curriculum. Despite their desire to do so, their daily experiences in the small rural town did not support a metropolitan lifestyle. Their response to their lack of success in establishing a more personalised (Swain 2006a) or inclusive (Anderson 2009) form of masculine identity against which to measure various accomplishments was a mixture of self-blame and resistance through the familiar practices associated with working class masculinity and engagement in the mask of masculinity (Pollack 1998).

The normalisation of both the physical and sexualised dynamics associated with this form of masculinity occurred through the community's valorisation of those practices and was reinforced through sport in the school environment, and was deeply detrimental to all involved. Whilst it generated a sense of failure for many young men it also resulted in feelings of alienation from the school environment for the cool girls, experiences of exclusion, marginalisation and lost opportunities for academic success for the quiet girls, the nerds and the ghetto people, and a sense of powerlessness for teachers.

The extent to which the social construction of the culturally exalted form of masculinity that shaped the young people's experiences of education at Hillsville High was supported through community interactions and expectations reveals the importance of rurality in shaping young people's educational experiences. For example, although there were many positive aspects of the interactions that took place between some teachers and the cool boys and wannabes through sports, they also worked to inflame already existing community divisions in the school context. This was linked to the perceived camaraderie between teachers and the cool boys and wannabes generated by the common interest in sport; there was a lack of acknowledgement of the detrimental impact of the behaviours of these two groups on other students that these relationships were perceived to produce. These dynamics were felt most strongly by the young people most marginalised in the community, the ghetto people, who felt that the bond between some teachers and students meant that their own concerns and experiences were overlooked.

The exposure of the cool girls' struggles to balance their desire to maintain their membership in supportive friendship groups with a desire to gain the social status of being a cool girl in both the school and community culture further develops the understandings of the intricate relationship between the school and the small community. The young women's experiences of exclusion and isolation in the school context cannot be considered in isolation, but must be contextualised within the high level of social capital through which information and gossip is rapidly exchanged between the community field and the field of education. The social sanctions of social isolation and exclusion as a result of being labelled 'slut' were especially reinforced in both the school and community context, leaving the young women with no alternative venue for self-expression in the small rural town. This left some young women socially and emotionally exhausted and feeling alienated from their own potential and relationships with peers.

The stories of the academically engaged and successful cool girls and quiet girls join a large body of literature in questioning the dichotomy of underperforming boys and successful girls (Hayes and Lingaard 2003; Keddle and Mills 2007; Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli 2003). Although many young women wanted to engage with their education, they were largely prevented from doing so because of the dominance of hegemonic masculinity in the classroom. This insight exposes the continuing influence of deep-seated gender inequalities on girls' educational experiences which has been largely ignored in the essentialism of the 'what about the boys' debate.

Chapter 8: The views of teachers, parents and policy makers

Cathy was working in class and I said to her, 'What are you gonna be?' and she said 'I'm gonna be a nurse'. And I said, 'Why not a doctor? Because you can do that.' And I met her much later and she said to me, 'It was that conversation with you that turned me around.' My worry is how many conversations have I had that turned people off (Mr Barnes, Policy Maker).

Introduction

In this chapter I examine the experiences, views and perceptions of teachers, parents and policy makers of education in a rural setting in order to further the understanding of the young participants' decisions to leave or stay in education. I argue that the role of rurality in constructing a particular education environment and educational experiences is not well understood by these groups of respondents, especially teachers and policy makers. Specifically, this group shared with the young people an emphasis on strong social relationships as the key to improve educational experiences, but their lack of recognition of the importance of physicality, sport and hegemonic masculinity in shaping social relations in the local community meant that teachers' conscious efforts to form relationships with students often reinforced these existing dynamics. The dominance of hegemonic masculinity in the construction of social relations in Hillsville also impacted on teachers' and parents' relationships with the school. Their shared experiences of feeling powerless in the education system was particularly related to difficulties in addressing patterns of domination and subordination because of the lack of recognition of the role of hegemonic masculinity in the informal school cultures.

Teachers: 'I wish I could just teach instead of having to man the door'

The social dynamics of the informal school culture that dominated the students' experiences of education also penetrated their teachers' experiences of working at Hillsville High. Ms Dickinson explains how these dynamics played out for the teachers:

There are three main groups in my class – the popular girls who are always crying about something, the quiet girls who want to learn, and the boys and everything revolves around that. The boys just can't organise themselves. The other day they had

to do something with the mean, the median and the mode, and we have been through it that many times, but most students just yelled out 'Ms Dickinson, what is this?' And I said, 'You just have to read the instructions on the sheet' and I already knew I had lost the battle because there was the sheet thrown on the floor here and there. I could see the girls looking through their books to refresh their memory on the mean and that but all the other groups just did nothing. I feel so bad about never having the time to attend to these girls...but what can I do? It's like those boys do not want to be seen to be smart because that's nerdy. It's certainly not cool to do schoolwork. Last year I had a Year 11 class and so they wanted to be there and learn for their exams. It was so nice. That's what teaching is about. I wish I could just teach instead of constantly having to man the door and keep the class in there.

Ms Dickinson here encapsulates the views expressed by many teachers that most of their time and efforts were spent managing one group of students whilst not being able to attend to the needs of other students. She also explicates how attending to behavioural issues prevented teachers from focusing on the subject areas in which they were trained and passionate about, and compromised their role as professional educators.

Although difficulty in constructing positive classroom environments is reported as a key issue in other research (Hudson 2009; Putman 2009), Ms Dickinson's concerns are also firmly located in Hillsville's rural context. Her reflection on the 'popular girls who are always crying about something' and comment that 'the boys just can't organise themselves' particularly confirm that the dynamics underpinning the informal student hierarchy at the school went unnoticed. The consequence was that the needs of some student groups were ignored and the behaviours of the dominant young men naturalised, reinforcing existing dynamics and aiding the legitimisation of the view that boisterous, loud and at times violent behaviours was just a case of 'boys being boys'. The lack of recognition of the gendered hierarchy was also reflected in discussions with teachers about the role of gender in educational engagement and outcomes which often involved comments such as 'ability is individual' (Ms Carpenter), 'I don't see any gender issues at this school' (Ms Willis) and 'gender is a thing of the past' (Mrs Anderson). These perceptions confirm the relevance of Youdell's (2006) theory of how dominant beliefs on class, gender and ethnicity influence the construction of students as learners to understanding young rural people's educational choices.

The view that gender was unimportant contradicted the gender specific programs put in place by the school such as behavioral and emotional programs for young men. This contrast may be explained by a tension between the formal values of the education department and local knowledges. Even though many teachers were deeply involved with the community and possessed key aspects of the rural habitus, they were not dismissive of the gender programs. However, they widely perceived these programs as a way for the young men to manage the effect of their hormones rather than improving their knowledge of the cultural constructs of masculinities. It was, for example, explained to me that a group of young men went bushwalking 'to get rid of some energy' (Mrs Anderson). These observations are similar to the findings by McCleod and Yates (2006) that the dominant perception of masculinity by their participants as well as in policy discourses was that it was fixed and unable to change. These findings confirm theories of how the essentialising of gender roles masks continuing gender inequalities in schools (Morris (2012b; Ringrose 2007; Lingaard, Mills and Weaver-Hightower 2012).

There were, however, some teachers who placed a greater importance on the role of gender in academic performance than others. Ms Dickenson, for example, said that 'the kids have a highly sexualised behavior' compared to young people in other schools in which she had taught, and Mr Marshall made more complaints than any other teacher about the behaviours of the cool boys and wannabies. Like Ms Dickinson, his complaints focus on physical and sexualised acts, such as 'the boys will go to any length to annoy the girls so they can't focus on their school work' or 'they will just be all over the girls'. Ms Dickinson's and Mr Marshall's acknowledgement of the gender dynamics at the school was linked to a number of factors that distinguished them from other teachers. Their urban background meant that they were not inculcated in rural culture, and both teachers also participated marginally in community sporting events. Their outsider status meant that they did not normalise the cultural hierarchy operating at the school, but questioned it.

Whether or not teachers questioned the cultural hierarchy at the school, they experienced difficulties in maintaining a supportive and inclusive learning environment. The most common response to this situation was to hand students 'busy' work. This kind of work was perceived as 'bad teaching' as it involved the use of worksheets which were defined as simplistic and boring compared to more abstract work such as self-directed studies and projects. Mrs Anderson explains how this situation sometimes occurred as a result of the students' lack of engagement with the preferred teaching methods:

My Grade 9 climbs the walls if I say 'Here are 10 activities. Pick five of them and do it at your own pace.' But if I give them a structured worksheet then they are much better. They just cannot think. You can't discuss anything with them because they don't have a point of view. They'll just believe anything you tell them and not be critical towards any statements. We have this book now about environmentalism and there's a picture of a white man and a black man and they have to imagine what the men are saying. But no one could think of anything so I said to them, well, the black man could say, 'Here I am sweating in the sun and all I want to do is to go home for dinner' or he could say 'White man you have taken my land and all my rights away from me' and they didn't react or even laugh! I just don't think they have been taught to think that way. And the other day I gave them a grammar sheet and a spelling test and they loved it. It is really bad teaching I know but they love it. Well, as soon as we watched Shakespeare one was at the light bulb, the other at the door...they just can't concentrate on it.

Mrs Anderson's account shows how the rural habitus of her students clashes with a middle class curriculum which requires them to think globally and critically. For the young people who were so deeply embedded in their local area, its tight social networks and knowledges homogeneity and acceptance of social norms were more habitual than an understanding of diversity and abstract thinking (Kenway, Kraack and Hickey-Moody 2006; McCleod and Yates 2006). The importance of place is especially foregrounded in Mrs Anderson's comment that 'I just don't think they have been taught to think that way'. The ethnocentric qualities of this aspect of the rural habitus is further highlighted in the young people's thinking on environmental and cultural issues which is tightly constructed around the struggle and courage of white settlers in a foreign land, rather than an emphasis on the diversity of human experience.

The need to equip teachers with the knowledge and skills to understand the characteristics of the rural habitus and successfully deliver the curriculum to students possessing this kind of habitus was raised by some members of staff. Mrs Anderson pointed out that 'some teachers have bigger problems themselves because there's not the theatre, not the restaurant, and then I think they get a little bit frustrated and see the kids as country bumpkins and yeah I would say that some teachers have a problem teaching in a rural context, especially the ones who have never been out of the city'. Mrs Anderson here highlights how the contrast between the rural unambiguous identity of the students and the more metropolitan attitudes of teachers inculcated in a middle class, urban curriculum formed part of the dynamics shaping

interaction at the school. Together with the processes of exclusion operating in the community to create insiders and outsiders, this insight helps to explain the greater retention of teachers at rural schools who themselves have some experience of rural lifestyles (Boylan and McSwann 1998; Burton and Johnson 2010). It also draws attention to a need to emphasise the effect of rurality on educational engagement in educational policies and curriculum development.

Concerns about the powerlessness of teachers in establishing an environment supportive of academic study were experienced by teachers as compromising their professional role and their sense of achievement and progress. Ms Dawson said that 'It totally frustrates me. I've got so many ideas about what I'd like to do with students and what I could do for them, but I know if I try, and I've done it before, it will end up in a mess so now I don't even try, and I know that sounds terrible'. Teachers dealt with this situation in different ways. Ms Willis, like Ms Dawson above, found that 'it is important to be realistic. I know that some kids I can't engage and some kids work hard, and sometimes I've just got to work with the kids who are engaged and then hopefully try to sort sometimes else for the other kids'. Whilst trying to mainly focus on the students who were willing to engage was one strategy, other teachers, like Mr Marshall, attempted to a greater extent to cater for all students at all times by 'wiping the slate clean every time I go in the class'. Whilst teachers invested in different strategies to address the lack of engagement with the formal curriculum, they nevertheless shared a high level of powerlessness and a failure to engage all students in meaningful educational activity, which stemmed from their lack of understanding of the interaction between the rural habitus and the formal curriculum.

Teachers also described experiences of verbal and physical harassment as impacting on their health and wellbeing and ability to carry out their professional duties. Some of these issues included sexist or other derogatory comments or body language, stealing, threatening teachers, dishonesty and a few incidents of minor physical confrontation between teachers and students. Mrs Whitley explained in her story that 'one young man pulled this black stocking over his head and wouldn't take it off. Like a bank robber. Then he would jump out in front of you when you least expected it. It went on for days. It wasn't a joke. We felt intimidated. He just did it because he could'. Ms Dickinson added to the accounts of harassment with her reflection on an encounter with John where her request for him to pick something up that he had just thrown on the ground triggered the response of 'John walk[ing] up to [me], stand[ing] as close to [me] as he can, face to face, gesturing wildly, yelling at

[me], objecting to having to pick up the object'. These kinds of incidents, together with the difficulties in maintaining a supportive learning environment and a professional role, impacted on the health and wellbeing of many teachers, with some acknowledging that 'I've been down this week, that's for sure' (Mr Marshall). The link between the occurrence of these incidents and the dominance of hegemonic masculinity in the informal school culture highlights the importance of exposing the power relations at the school to empower both staff and students.

Despite experiences of dealing disproportionately with behavioural issues in their work, many teachers at Hillsville High were characterised by their strong sense of attachment to the school and solidarity with their colleagues. The school's isolated location meant that teachers frequently socialised outside school hours, but also that teachers needed to work closely together to develop local alternatives to, for example, excursions to the cinema or the art gallery. Ms Carpenter, for example, expressed her delight in the freedom she had to shape the curriculum together with Ms Jones through their involvement in an animal care program. Mrs Anderson also pointed out that teachers at the school had a high attendance rate and were highly supportive of each other. For example, because of difficulties in attracting relief teachers to the isolated school, staff had been instrumental in constructing a roster which allowed a number of teachers to be away every week.

The appreciation of close personal relationships amongst colleagues also extended to the relationships that could be obtained with students because of the more frequent interaction outside the school environment. Ms Dawson explained that 'I think I have a better relationship with students whom I see outside of school and that's the ones I play sport with. We don't very often see the parents in here and the parents I see are the parents of the students who I teach sport and people I deal with, like the bus driver or the cleaner of the indoor cricket centre or the basketball stadium'. Whilst Ms Dawson's story suggests that rural life might offer unique ways for students and teachers to form relationships, it also confirms that revenues for interaction are restricted, and mainly take place through participation in sport (Leyshon 2008; Dunkley 2004; Tucker and Matthews 2001).

Parents: 'We don't think it's the teachers' fault'

The construction of insiders and outsiders was also a key concern in parents' accounts of their children's experiences of schooling. Mrs Grant explains:

My children's knowledge seemed to be quite different. Mike was prepared to do his work in and outside class and he didn't like all the mucking around in class. See Anna got in with them a little bit but there was really not a group for Mike to get into. He would just have liked to be with a few people who valued education. Anna still decided to change schools and she was also getting some sexual harassment here as well and I think that was really hard for her because there's this constant swearing and crudeness which was part of the culture.

In her descriptions of her children's experiences Mrs Grant points to the informal student culture at the school in which her children's cultural capital was perceived as inferior. The understanding of Mike's interest in education as deviant confirms the dominance of the masculine hierarchy in the school culture, but his own experiences of a lack of what he and his parents consider 'reasonable behaviour' also contributes to the construction of him as an outsider. His sister Anna's experiences are similarly indicative of a tension between the nature of the community cultural capital and the middle class cultural capital of her own family, with Anna deciding to change schools because of the ongoing sexual harassment. Difficulties in fitting into the school's cultural hierarchy was also expressed by another parent, Mrs Rice, in her reflections on the continuing harassment of her two sons, which she believed took place because 'my boys hadn't gone to the local primary school so they were outsiders and never accepted. It's the same for my husband and I. We are not really part of the local community'. Mrs Rice's story reiterates the theme of Mrs Grant's account of the failure of outsiders to be accepted into the cultural hierarchy at Hillsville High, thereby attracting unwanted attention with potential for bullying. These stories confirm the presence of a dark side of social capital (Tonts 2005) that is associated with social exclusion for both parents and children who fail to conform to the dominant culture in the community.

Parents also nominated 'other parents'' lack of support for their children as a contributing factor to their experiences of social exclusion in the school environment. Mr Conrad, for example, spoke of how he saw this lack of parental support contributing to the difficulties teachers had in maintaining an inclusive classroom. He linked a lack of parental support to what he termed 'social unrest' in Hillsville, including a lack of parental guidelines for children in association with drinking and staying out until late, as well as the tumultuous atmosphere that sometimes characterised the classroom. Mrs Beckett expanded on this view in her comment that 'Too many parents are quick to blame the school and they should probably stop and look at what's going on at home. Instead of working with the school and

trying to sort things out they just back up and don't do anything. I guess sometimes parents don't care if their child has a problem. They send them to school and think "that's not our problem, you deal with that there" '. The comments that 'other parents' should be more supportive of their children and the school reflect community divisions, as the parent sample in this study largely consisted of parents from professional or management backgrounds. This lack of parents from working class or disadvantaged backgrounds in the sample confirms the notion that a gap may exist between the cultural capital of the school and these parents, further contributing to the marginalisation of this group of parents. Yet the stories of parents from professional and management backgrounds demonstrates how this group of parents also felt marginalised in the school context because of the domination of a highly physical form of hegemonic masculinity. This sense of marginalisation is further highlighted through the reluctance of three parents to participate in an interview on the school premises and their request to meet elsewhere, as outlined in the methodology chapter.

Parents' understanding of the construction of insiders and outsiders in the informal school culture was linked to their concerns that their children's opportunities for learning were severely jeopardised. Mrs Rice thought that 'the education system is a good system but it fails to support many children. I think it was better in my time when there was level 1, 2 and 3. At least the students who wanted to learn got the opportunity to learn'. Mrs Peterson further elucidates the difficulties in getting work done at school 'because... the classes were so erratic and so she [Lauren] was feeling bad that she didn't get things done and getting them in. Kids do learn 'cause they are smart but they just sit there'. Mr and Mrs Conrad similarly point to the lack of support for learning in their statement, saying that 'in Anita's case the education system has failed, and we can't help thinking that if all the naughty people had been taken out of class, what would she have achieved?'

Despite concerns about social exclusion, isolation or bullying most parents appreciated the efforts made by the school in combatting this. Mrs Prior explains that when her son, Stanley, 'first started in Grade 7 he was bullied. I guess because primary school was a small school they just had to get along and then they came to high school and had different family friends they could hang out with. I spoke to the school and we set Stanley up at the computers in the library and he became friends with Neville'. Mrs Prior's view that the school had been helpful in helping Stanley settle into high school life was shared by most other parents. Mrs Peterson, for example, says that 'Lauren is friends with Natalie and apparently the school put them together 'cause they were two of the shyest kids who came to school in Grade 7'. Mrs

Beckett says that 'I've found that if there is a problem then the teachers will work with you, if they [the children] get into trouble'. While most parents saw the school and its teachers as doing their best in dealing with social isolation and bullying, this view coexisted with a sense that to a high degree teachers were powerless in doing this. Some parents, like Mrs Prior above, ultimately placed the responsibility for the bullying of Stanley's brother on his quiet personality and inability to 'speak up', whilst Mrs Rice said that 'We made the school aware of it a few times but what can they do?'. These comments indicate that the school took seriously the issues reported by parents and their children, but that the focus on addressing individual problems rather than social dynamics did not successfully resolve the concerns of parents and their children.

Parents' concerns about their children's marginalisation in the classroom were strongly linked to the theme of the lack of discipline and control in the classroom, but parents did not blame the school and its teachers for this situation. Mrs Conrad said that 'I don't think it's the teacher's fault but I think the classroom has got so far out of hand because the kids have got this attitude "you can't touch us" and it's got to change in that area. And you know what? When Carol [older daughter] went through high school she had people at the school telling her about the rights she had and they would say "your mum and dad can't make you do this" '. Mrs Conrad's account of her daughter's awareness of her rights reflects teachers' experiences of feeling powerless to maintain a supportive classroom because of the decrease in their authority as teachers and an increase in the rights of the students.

Some parents also linked the increase in children's rights to harassment of teachers, for example Mr Conrad, who reflects on his own experiences as a past student at Hillsville High:

Mrs Green, she was at school when I was there, and she was just 'how are you going, get down to your work' and now every second thing the kids say back to her sounds like abuse, and if I was one of the teachers I would be putting in complaints and probably take legal action. The things that kids say to the teachers you just wouldn't say to your dog. We don't think it's the teachers' fault. They can just tell so-and-so to sit down again and again but how are you gonna make them sit down? They're supposed to be the social worker and all sorts of things.

Parents clearly related the difficulties in maintaining discipline in the classroom to broader societal processes rather than blaming individual teachers. This view was underpinned by their understanding of social transformations such as the processes of individualisation and

detraditionalisation (Beck 1992; Giddens 1991), their own experiences of how these processes had eroded parental authority, and how this played out in the school context.

Parents' concerns with the dynamics taking place in the informal school culture meant that whether or not to arrange for their children to change schools had been a recurrent issue for them during their children's time at high school. Because of the limited school choice in the small rural community many parents found themselves faced with the dilemma of whether to send their children to the private school or keep them at Hillsville High. The private school was perceived as not having the same level of disciplinary issues, but the majority of parents had decided not to send their children to another school for the reason that their children had found the transition from primary to secondary school traumatic but had finally settled into some friendship groups. Mrs Peterson explains how Lauren 'came here for an interview. She was so distraught when I came to pick her up and she hadn't eaten and she was so nervous. And I had her booked into the private school but then she had made friends with Bob and I just couldn't put her through all that again. She complained right up until this year, every year that she didn't want to be here'. Despite Mrs Peterson's understanding that her daughter's learning experiences were jeopardised at the school, the experience of the traumatic transitioning from primary school to high school kept her from enrolling Lauren in the Christian school. Mr and Mrs Conrad's story is similar, noting that 'at some stage we considered taking Anita out of the school and sending her to the private school but then she had good friends at the high school and that's why we decided not to'. Mrs Grant was the only parent who had decided to withdraw her children from Hillsville High because 'one day I saw Mike standing on his own in the middle of the courtyard, he just had nowhere else to go, and I thought "no way this kid's going back here" '. It is well known that middle class parents use their social and cultural capital to influence their children's educational outcomes (Devine 2005; Halliday 2009; Jæger and Holm 2007), but the parents in this study placed a greater importance on their children's membership in friendship groups than academic achievements. This may be explained by the high value placed on social capital in rural areas.

Policy makers: 'Teachers interpret the curriculum to suit the individual child'

To a high degree the policy makers' views on improving Tasmanian retention and completion patterns was influenced by their belief that personal relationships between students and teachers were critical to an increase in educational engagement. Whilst there was widespread agreement amongst this group of participants that some educational policies and strategies

were too mechanistic and lacked connection with the characteristics of the contemporary labour market (Dwyer and Wyn 2001; Cohen and Ainley 2000), it was also recognised that the Pathways Planning program in particular provided a means by which teachers could connect with the lives of their students. Mr Frost, for example, said that ‘pathway planning in schools [has] helped a lot as well because it does get down to that personal level that people become more aware of the personal circumstances and how those are likely to impend on someone’s decisions’.

The importance placed on building good relationships between students and teachers was intertwined with the belief that high student expectations were essential to student engagement and could be reached through positive student–teacher relationships. Mr Barnes offers his insights on the issue in the recollection of his previous teaching experience:

All programs in the world would come to naught if that relationship wasn’t there. If you don’t value that group of kids – they’ll know, if you’re not genuine about that group of kids you’re responsible for as a teacher or principal – they’ll know, they pick it up, they pick up what you put into it. It’s that incidental conversation that you have with those kids in country areas. You don’t know it but you change their lives. I’ll give you a concrete example. Cathy...she was in my science class many years ago when I was a teacher. She was working in class and I said to her, ‘What are you gonna be?’ and she said ‘I’m gonna be a nurse’. And I said, ‘Why not a doctor? Because you can do that.’ And I met her much later and she said to me, ‘It was that conversation with you that turned me around.’ My worry is how many conversations have I had that turned people off. You see people wanting diverse programs, but in the end, success of kids in schools depends on the attitudes of teachers.

Mr Barnes here points to the critical role of teachers in the success of students (Burton and Johnson 2010; Dziubinski 2014; Lingaard et al. 2002). His emphasis on the importance of the expectation for students to aim high and the acknowledgement that their own subjective aspirations may not be indicative of their actual abilities reflects the findings on the role of the rural habitus in shaping young people’s educational choices. According to the policy makers, teachers are a critical tool in influencing student aspirations and encouraging students to continue their education.

All policy makers were also at pains to point out that the teachers’ ability to interpret the curriculum and individualise learning was a key way to improve retention and completion

patterns. Mrs Gibson explains that ‘there is an expectation that teachers can teach to the individual and interpret the curriculum to suit the individual child’. Mrs Maguire elaborates on this in her statement that ‘if we are going to have policies which are going to improve retention in rural areas it really would be around helping teachers to develop their teaching skills in a way that help them to address individual students’ views rather than what some people might perceive as teaching for the curriculum, for the teacher’s needs and not the students’. Although this view was shared by all policy makers, some, including Mr Barnes, acknowledged that the freedom to interpret the curriculum could be challenging because ‘they [urban teachers] will interpret the curriculum in their own way’. This reflects Bourdieu’s (1990: 67) argument that schools inculcate new teachers in the culture that they want to pass on, and that this disadvantages students who are not inculcated in this culture, such as rural students. The importance of interpreting the curriculum according to social context also related to the use of resources. It was commonly agreed amongst policy makers that ‘some of the most successful ones [approaches to resourcing] draw on community resources’ and not on economic resources (Mr Frost). Mr Barnes explains how community approaches can be particularly successful through his account of a particular teacher, Sarah. He had once worked with Sarah, who drew on a farming community’s infrastructure to teach the ‘same concepts of science being taught in Kings College in Melbourne or Sydney, same concepts about chemistry, acids and bases’. Sarah’s ability to interpret the curriculum and individualise her teaching for her teaching is here used by Mr Barnes to highlight the superiority of a cultural approach to improving engagement with education rather than an economic one. Mrs Gibson points out that ‘teachers and principals may say yes, resourcing plays a big role in implementing strategies and initiatives in schools, but that’s not my view. I think that even within current limits of resourcing things could probably be better. Things could be done more efficiently but also we need to capitalise on more opportunities’. Mrs Gibson’s account connects with current neoliberal approaches to education policy, and indicates a tension based on access to economic resources between the views of teachers and policy makers. The contrast between the claim of policy makers that teachers’ ability to use cultural approaches is critical to improving retention and completion and the difficulties of teachers at Hillsville High in reading the local community dynamics and applying them to the school context suggest a need to raise teachers’ awareness of rural community dynamics (Corbett 2009).

Powerlessness, meritocracy and the emancipatory power of critical pedagogy

Feelings of powerlessness in constructing and maintaining a supportive and inclusive classroom was a strong theme in both teachers' and parents' accounts of their experiences of Hillsville High. Although teachers downplayed a number of factors complicating the maintenance of an inclusive classroom such as sexualised and physical behaviour, their regrets about having to direct most of their attention towards the cool boys and wannabes highlight their deeply felt concerns about the dynamics operating in the classroom and their inability to support all students in the classroom. One key factor preventing teachers from successfully addressing the dynamics playing out in the classroom was their lack of understanding of the factors underpinning these dynamics.

Although most teachers to some degree recognised the role of rurality in shaping interactions at the school, important aspects of its influence on the social dynamics of the classroom often went unacknowledged. Mrs Dawson's story of her interactions with students and parents through community sporting events particularly develops the understanding of the existence of a dark side of social capital in Hillsville (Tonts 2005). It helps to explain the cool boys' and the wannabes' perceptions that 'teachers are friends' – despite continuous conflict between these two groups in the school environment – as being due to their frequent interactions through community sports. It deepens the understanding of the quiet girls' resentment towards teachers because of their stance against the sports-masculinity nexus. It also shed light upon the ghetto people's view on the cool boys, wannabes and cool girls as enemies because of these groups' interactions with their teachers outside the school environment which the ghetto people saw as leading to favouritism in the school context.

The teachers' perception that many parents were unsupportive of the school was a similarly unacknowledged dynamic shaping interactions at the school. Teachers' perceptions that parents' 'just don't want to be involved' contradicted the substantial parental representation at assemblies and school events, and confirms that the gap between a parental rural cultural capital and that of the school discouraged parents from engaging in personal conversations with the teachers. The insight that parents in this study largely remained loyal to the school despite feeling that it had failed their children further challenges the teachers' perception of parents as disengaged with their children's schooling. It connects with the *gemeinschaft* qualities of Hillsville, especially the role of social capital in facilitating knowledge of the

work of other community members, and helps to highlight the unique relationships between locality and schooling.

The connection between rurality and a particular construction of gender and its effect on educational engagement and achievement was another factor influencing the social relationships at the school that was generally unclear to most teachers. Many teachers' belief that their students' relationships with their education were not gendered stemmed to a high degree from the community celebration of a highly physical form of masculinity which was carried over into the school environment and normalised there. The normalisation of this form of gendered behaviour as 'hormones' contributed to teachers' misrecognition of the practices and beliefs associated with hegemonic masculinity as a natural expression of the social order. The stories of the marginalised young people reveal how teachers themselves played a role in facilitating a relatively smooth carry-over of shared meanings and understandings from the community field into the education field through their acceptance of Hillsville's 'culturally exalted hierarchy'. The young people's accounts of some teachers' unawareness of the effects of the cool boys' and the wannabes' behaviours on other students, as well as the complicity of some teachers in the masculine hierarchy highlight the role of teachers in maintaining existing gender dynamics (Youdell 2006).

The influence of hegemonic masculinity on educational engagement was further masked by a belief in meritocracy supported through the neoliberal discourses underpinning education policy. The emphasis on individual factors underpinning this ideology was evident in the school's strategies in motivating students through self-paced and self-directed study, and worked to promote the idea of achievement as the result of individual effort and intelligence. In Hillsville's rural context neoliberal assumptions of responsibility and accountability were further backed by a rural ideology of self-sufficiency which reinforced the belief in meritocracy and the behaviours of some young men as individual acts of 'boys being boys'. This double reinforcement of the importance of individual effort helps to explain how most teachers maintained the belief that 'ability is individual' despite the implementation of formal gender programs. Teaching approaches designed to engage individual students in their learning such as self-paced and self-designed projects reflect the beliefs in individual effort and entrepreneurship (Nairn, Sligo and Higgins 2012), and their limited success can be partly linked to the lack of engagement with the characteristics of the rural habitus.

The importance of the teachers' role in shaping individual students' educational experiences and outcomes is theorised by Bourdieu (1990) in his notion of the inculcation of teachers in a middle class curriculum. The explanation offered by some rural teachers that non-rural teachers tended to be ignorant about some aspects of the rural habitus and its connection with the academic curriculum confirms the importance of Bourdieu's notion of teachers as inculcated in a particular ideological framework. Whilst the indication that some rural teachers were more likely to overlook gender dynamics than non-rural teachers points to the importance of teachers' own rural habitus in shaping young people's experiences of schooling rather than institutionalised forms of power, it confirms the significance of teachers in influencing young people's educational experiences. These insights provide a justification for establishing a clearer focus on rurality in educational policy to strengthen teachers' familiarity with the characteristics of rural areas and their residents.

Despite experiences of failure, marginalisation, exclusion and powerlessness to change these experiences, many individuals also had positive stories to tell about their relationship with the school. The contradiction between negative experiences of schooling and positive views on the school and its teachers may be a specific feature of rural communities. Many young men's ambiguous experiences of high school and their appreciation of the support of their teachers, the desire of both the cool and quiet girls and the nerds for greater interaction with their teachers as well as parental support of the school may be explained by the *gemeinschaft* qualities of Hillsville and the sense of solidarity internalised through the rural habitus. This insight provides an important platform for further developing relationships between students and teachers and teachers and parents. However, it is essential that the development of student-teacher relations takes into account the social dynamics underpinning young people's complex and ambiguous experiences of life in isolated communities.

The tension in the views of teachers and policy makers in relation to resourcing and the need to sensitise teachers to aspects of rural life suggest a need for these areas to be further explored to help improve low rural retention and completion rates. Although there may not be a need for a specific rural curriculum, the difficulties of teachers at Hillsville High in identifying local community dynamics indicate that a greater emphasis on rurality may be beneficial both for retaining teachers in rural areas and developing close student-teacher relationships.

Whilst the views of policy makers have particular strengths in arguments about individualised learning and cultural approaches, they also reflect the impact of economic rationalism and cost-cutting exercises on the education system. The evidence that public schools are underfunded, especially rural schools (Brennan 2006; Mackenzie 2007; Nairn, Higgins and Sligo 2006), in combination with the concern of teachers in this study that they were unable to meet the costs of hiring buses and excursions for their students to museums, cinemas or theatres, suggests that these matters are very real concerns. It is important that these issues are not lost in the rhetoric of individualised learning strategies and neoliberal notions of self-responsibility.

Chapter 9: Aspirations and choices

What if I make the wrong choice?(Anita)

Introduction

In this chapter I explore the young people's educational and employment aspirations before analysing their educational choices. I argue that their rural habitus and the nature of their social and cultural capital are central to understanding these choices. Whilst decisions to leave school early were strongly linked to local forms of social and cultural capital, choices to stay were associated with broader social and cultural networks. I further argue that many of the young people's internalisation of the neoliberal messages on self-responsible citizenry which were shown to penetrate the education system in chapter 6 further convoluted their relationship with education by generating feelings of failure associated with being unsuccessful at school. Feelings of failure were especially prominent amongst the young men because of the centrality of hegemonic masculinity in their lives and its association with physicality rather than the intellectualism valued by formal schooling. For many young women the policy discourse on self-responsibility generated anxieties around being able to maintain their success in education, especially as this also involved successfully negotiating the largely foreign environment of the city.

Individualised aspirations

A common theme running through the young people's aspirations for their futures was the highly individualised nature of their aspirations. Some young people 'just knew' that they wanted to be different from the mainstream and commented that 'I don't want to be like anyone else' (Susan), 'I want to make my own choices' (Wendy) and 'I want to become an interesting person' (Anne). Others were more specific about how to achieve an individualised form of identity, such as Robert who said that 'I don't want a 9 to 5' and Phillip who '[doesn't] want a wife and 2 kids'. These comments suggest that the young rural participants were similar to youth from other social and cultural backgrounds in being optimistic about their futures (Eckersley et al. 2007; McCleod and Yates 2006; Nairns, Higgins and Sligo 2006) and in seeking to stand out in the crowd by creating a deeply unique identity which mirrored their private selves (Allen and Mendick 2013; Eckersley, Wierenga and Wyn 2006; Mendick and Allen 2012). The individualised nature of the young people's aspirations is

further evident in the almost complete absence of traditional markers of adulthood in their accounts such as having a family or buying a house which has also been demonstrated in broader youth research (te Riele 2004).

Getting a job was seen as the most important means of reaching the kind of unique personality sought by the young participants. Most of the young people were unable to articulate the specific type of job they wanted, but they knew that they wanted a 'good job'. A 'good job' was characterised by being non-repetitive, high income, with opportunities for mobility and self-actualisation and fun; more males nominated outside work than girls, who were more likely to nominate indoor work as enjoyable. Some young people, especially young men, spoke of obtaining several qualifications, such as that of a 'mechanic and builder' (John), to create opportunities for being mobile and avoid 'getting stuck' and 'bored' (John; Phillip; Robert) in the same job for a long period of time. Other young men and women emphasised working in occupations which would allow them to travel inside or outside the region (Anne; Stanley; Ralph). This emphasis on employment as a journey rather than a fixed destination where you 'get stuck' reflects the young people's individualised aspirations, but also their awareness of a changing labour market with demands for flexible, mobile and multi-skilled workers.

The young participants strongly felt that the key to obtaining a 'good job' was education, and completion of Year 10, senior secondary education, vocational and tertiary were all seen as contributing to making good decisions (Nairn, Higgins and Sligo 2006). Compulsory schooling was commonly seen as providing 'basic life skills' (Robert) and senior secondary education as affording 'better chances of getting work' (Rose; John). Ryan, for example, says that 'if you have an apprenticeship you earn more money and you have the option to work in a good work environment', Neville says that 'you will have a more interesting life if you have some education' and Rose says that 'I want to be a nurse so I can get good stable work anywhere'. As with other groups of young people (Alloway et al. 2004), the students at Hillsville High had clearly internalised the message that education is crucial for economic and social success. However, despite the shared aspirations of wanting 'to make my own choices' and have 'a good job', as well as understanding the importance of education in realising these ambitions, embracing these ideas was not straightforward, with many consciously making the choice to leave school early. This paradox is partly explained by the discrepancies between their aspirations and the social and cultural resources they had available to realise those aspirations.

Aspirations and glocalisation

The young people's high expectations of achieving their own unique personality and lifestyle were shaped by a number of factors. The absorption of formal education messages about self-responsible citizenry through the school contributed to the internalisation of desirable qualities such as self-responsibility and self-discipline. Messages on self-responsibility were often accompanied by an emphasis on the necessity to maximise one's competitiveness in the labour market by obtaining educational qualifications and degrees. In many formal speeches, for example at assemblies, the need for students to 'continue on to further education to be able to compete in the labour market' (Mr Fielding, in the final Year 10 assembly) was heavily emphasised. Such messages, repeated on an everyday basis in both formal and informal situations, contributed to the young people's high expectations of themselves, and the view that they were responsible for realising their aspirations through their own talent, intelligence and hard work ((Nairn, Higgins and Sligo 2006); te Riele 2012).

The neoliberal messages of self-responsibility promoted by the education department were supported by the more traditional farming ideology of self-reliance rooted in the community itself (Gray and Lawrence 2001). The examples of young men and women who contributed to their families' health and wellbeing by helping out in the family business, cutting wood or hunting for food that were outlined in chapter 5 exemplify the continuing importance of this ideology in Hillsville. The data also contain examples of how these activities could interfere with the young people's education. Both Ms Carpenter and Mr Marshall had students in their classes who 'get up at 3 or 4am in the morning to work before they come to school. No wonder they fall asleep at the end of the day!' (Ms Carpenter). Anita's decision to be absent from school for an extended period of time to help out on the family farm constitutes another example of the importance of self-reliance in the community. Anne, with obvious admiration for Anita's choice, told the class one morning that Anita was not coming to school because she was helping her family fight a fire on their property. This story received sympathetic replies such as 'well done' (Ralph), 'poor people' (Susan) and 'I hope they are all right' (Mrs Willis).

These traditional beliefs were adopted by Hillsville High teachers in order to make their own messages about the self-responsible citizen more tangible to the students. For example, during the participant observation the analogy between 'being responsible for your own learning' and 'taking responsibility for the animals' (Mrs Anderson; Ms Carpenter) was used

numerous times to illustrate the importance of self-reliance and self-control. Animal care programs were also developed with the aim to ‘teach students responsibility’ (Ms Carpenter; Ms Jones). The reinforcement of the school’s own neoliberal messages through traditional rural ideology meant that these messages took on a particularly personal meaning for the young people, who were deeply embedded in the rural environment in which they lived. This left them at even greater risk of self-blame should they fail to live up to the neoliberal expectations of their education.

The young people’s aspirations were also situated within a broader social context of globalisation and the expansion of the media. Statements such as ‘I don’t want to be like anyone else’ and ‘I want to become an interesting person’ point to the weakening of traditional sources of identity caused by globalisation and the rise of individuality (Giddens 1991; Beck 1994). It especially points to the role of globalisation in delivering information across vast geographical areas and reducing the barrier of distance in accessing sources of identity construction. The media’s emphasis on individuality and celebrity culture as a particularly strong influence on young people’s aspirations and ‘identity work’ (Mendick and Allen 2012; Helme and Polesel 2004) was reflected in common statements such as ‘I want to make my own choices’, but also more explicitly in some young people’s aspirations ‘to be famous’, for example by becoming ‘a competitive car racer’ (Nick), ‘a famous rock climber’ (Robert), or ‘a professional dancer’ (Trudy). This links with other work on young people and their desire to not be ordinary (Lumby 2007), but also with work that identifies a gap between young people’s aspirations and realistic expectations. In a Mission Australia youth survey (2014), for example, more than 80 per cent of those surveyed said they wanted a good job and financial independence but only about 60 per cent felt these were achievable goals.

Tensions between aspirations and aspects of the rural habitus

Despite the young people’s high expectations of themselves and their belief that education was the key to success, their stories also revealed that some of the common factors associated with continuing on to years 11 and 12 included a clash between the respondents’ rural habitus and the physical and cultural requirements for continuing their education. Whilst most of the young people expressed concerns about this clash, it did not lead to choices to leave school early for all of them. This section explores the influence of the rural habitus on the student sample as a whole. The influences of rural masculinities and femininities and different forms

of family social and cultural capital on the young people's educational choices to leave or continue at school is investigated for each student group later in the chapter.

The young people themselves did not explicitly speak of the difficulties of meeting the costs associated with moving away from home and attending college in another town, but many teachers acknowledged that 'financial issues' were a challenge (Mr Potter; Mrs Dickinson; Mrs Anderson). This was also acknowledged by parents. Mrs Beckett, for example, speaks of her son Stephen's desire to leave his education before the completion of Year 12, but she and her husband had managed to help him negotiate a job with the local council. She contends that 'if Stephen hadn't got the position I would have pushed him to go on to years 11 and 12 here [mainly by distance studies]... he reckoned that he was going to the nearest town to live but I mean...just affordability would make that difficult'. The insights provided by some policy makers helped shed further light on this issue, with Mrs Maguire explaining that 'there are very few incentives for parents financially to send their children away...I don't believe the allowances are a sufficient incentive for people to see it as an attractive option'. These accounts reveal how the intersection of class and geographic location contribute to choices to leave school early by exacerbating financial concerns.

Although physical distance and financial concerns were directly implicated in the young people's educational decisions, many also emphasised how their rural habitus influenced choices to leave school early. The strong social capital in Hillsville and a lack of familiarity with the world beyond the local town particularly influenced decisions to leave the education system early, with both male and female participants nominating the move away from family and friends as a major deterrent to continue their education. Paul sums up the thoughts of many participants in his comment that 'This is where I grew up, it's my home. I couldn't just start fresh somewhere else. I have all my family here so I would end up coming back anyway even if I went away'. Often the young people's concerns about leaving their families were reflected in parental perceptions of their children moving away from home. Trudy, for example, explains that 'I'm not ready to live in Springfield yet...and mum doesn't really want me to anyway', and Mrs Beckett says that 'Stephen is just not mature enough to move away and live on his own so we have helped him to find employment here'. Even though the young people could make the choice to make a return trip from Hillsville to Springfield every day rather than moving to another town, this was often not considered an option because of the long bus trip involved. Wendy's statement that 'I just don't want to leave, and it is too far to travel every day. I can't get up that early in the morning and be back so late. I'll stay here

and see how I go' reflects the thoughts of many young people. The barrier of distance meant that attending college in another town was perceived to result in a move away from Hillsville, and was associated with a premature separation from family, friends and the local area, or hours spent travelling on the bus every day. This worked to deter many students from continuing their education after Year 10.

Gendered pathways

Although the young participants shared some common experiences of rural life and its relationship with their education, these experiences did not translate into a shared response to their educational pathways. Consistent with data on school retention and competition (Collins, Kenway and McCleod 2000; ACARA 2012) the young people's educational choices were gendered, with more young men deciding to leave school after Year 10 than young women. Although the national data above reveals that early school leaving is predominantly linked to young males, it also indicates that across Australia more young women from rural and remote areas leave school before completion of Year 12 than young women from regional and urban areas. In this study a relatively high number of young women said they wanted to leave school or that they were undecided about whether or not to continue on to years 11 and 12. This section provides an analysis of the young people's own stories of making the decision to leave school before completion of Year 12 or continuing on to years 11 and 12. Because decisions to leave school early were influenced by gender to a greater extent than decisions to stay at school, the analysis of choices to stay in school revolves around gendered pathways whilst the latter focuses on the nature of the young people's social and cultural capital.

The disconnect between school and the rural habitus experienced by most of the young people was especially evident amongst the young men. Their accounts of making the choice to stay or continue in education revealed that this was the result of the intertwining of structural factors in their rural habitus, such as the cultural capital of the school and their own choices based on lived experiences and intimate relationships. Although many young men valued education, many who strongly identified with hegemonic masculinity ultimately favoured the familiar and local world of manual labour over an education system which seemed foreign and hostile.

‘School is not for me’: The cool boys and the wannabes

The belief that education was the key to social and economic success was evident in most of the young men’s perception of unskilled, manual work as ‘bad work’. This kind of work was stigmatised as ‘a bad choice’ because of its association with seasonal, casual or part-time work and physical injury. Stephen explained that ‘my dad is a manager there [the factory] and he says after an hour’s work people’s clothes are soaked in sweat’. Ryan encapsulates many young men’s personal experiences of injured family members with his account that ‘my uncle got hurt and now he can’t work anymore’. Such personal experiences added weight to the messages brought to the young people by the education department that further education and training could translate into long-term economic and social benefits which unskilled manual work could not provide, and coloured their view on this form of labour. Despite the value placed on education, many young men expressed the view that the world of education was not for them. Ralph, for example, says that ‘we always knew we wanted to get out and get a life and get a job’, and Ryan says that further education ‘might get you a job somewhere in an office, but that’s not for me’. Associated with these types of statements was the idea that the Year 10 certificate provided sufficient education for finding employment. This certificate was often seen as signalling endurance and reliability to employers, as John explains in his statement that ‘it shows your future employer that you were able to go through school for all those years and achieve the certificate in the end’. In this comment John captures the common belief that obtaining the Year 10 certificate was linked to independence because of its association with paid employment in the local labour market. This tension between a perception of further education as leading to long-term economic and social benefits and a desire to establish independence in the realm of paid labour in an unskilled, physical job illustrates the importance of the rural habitus in educational decision making. The gendered aspect of the rural habitus and the valorisation of a highly physical form of masculinity influenced the young men to conclude that ‘school is not for me’ despite their recognition of the benefits of further education. The belief that a Year 10 certificate was sufficient to obtain employment further highlights the young men’s deep embeddedness in their local area with its rich natural resources and long history of providing manual work.

It is well known that class is closely linked to early school leaving (Fullarton, Ainley and Hillman 2003; Marks and McMillan 2001), but this study expands this insight through its observation that class also played an important part in shaping how the decision to leave school early was experienced. For some young men from manual backgrounds whose

command of hegemonic masculinity had displaced their commitment to academic performance, the decision to leave school early was interpreted as failure. This was evidenced in common statements such as ‘last year I had a fair old dip ‘cause you think “we’ve only got a year to go, what are we gonna do...how will I manage after school”?’ Just now we’ve started to get to know the teachers, become their friends. When you first come here you look at all those high kids. But now when you actually are here it’s a different feeling, we don’t feel so big’ (John); ‘I have to make the best of it now’ (Ryan); ‘it’s too late to change anything’ (Ralph). The processes underpinning these feelings of failure are highlighted in the following conversation between Gary and Phillip:

Phillip: I think I wasted my time in high school and now it’s too late to fix it. I just have to get the best out of it.

Gary: This is the last year of high school and I have done no work. It’s been my worst year in terms of doing work, you know. I should have, you know.

Phillip: And it’s too late to fix things now, I suppose. It’s all pretty much stuffed.

Gary: We just sat down and bludged all day. Talked about the weekend. We just can’t be bothered anymore. We had enough of it.

Phillip: And now it’s all too late...we’ve got what? A week and a half left? I would have liked to have done better.

Gary: Yeah....don’t really know...I don’t know how to say it...I’m stuck.

MS: There’s no right answer.

Phillip: I think having assignments to do....so you half finish them and hand them in even though I know I’m stupid, I feel stupid not to finish it, I didn’t think it was worth it at the stage.

Gary: That’s exactly how it is.

MS: Why didn’t you think it was worth it?

Gary: Why would you want to know about Captain Cook?

Philip: Yeah, if I want to do photography?

Phillip/Gary: Music is important. We both do music.

Gary: It's a little bit stressful having to leave now.

Phillip: No...well, yes, because we didn't do our work and now there's no more time and we wasted all that time. I'm not ready to get out in and get a full-time job yet.

In the above conversation, Gary and Phillip perceive their desire to 'do better' as being thwarted by their individual ability and efforts, as illustrated in statements such as 'I have wasted my time' and 'I feel stupid not doing it', rather than recognising the association between their difficulties in relating to the formal curriculum and their rural habitus. The belief that 'it is too late to change anything' indicates that the option to stay at school is inconceivable to the young men. This perceived lack of educational opportunities past Year 10 exacerbates existing feelings of failure generated by their difficulties in relating to their academic studies. This finding also provides a contrast to the findings by Nairn, Higgins and Sligo (2006) that all their participants, even those who left school, maintained a belief in returning to education. Most of the young men in this study did not plan to return to education but felt a strong sense of 'it's too late to change anything'.

In a conversation with Mrs Willis about the young men's experiences of failure she commented that at the award presentation at the final Year 10 assembly some students, including Gary, Ryan and Ralph, said that 'I wish it was me receiving an award' and that she was astonished by the sincerity of the statements. Mrs Willis's account confirms the young men's experience of a tension between a willingness to embrace the requirements of the formal curriculum and a desire to take up unskilled employment, and the deep sense of failure generated by this tension. It particularly suggests that although the young men had enjoyed the prestige that accompanied their association with the dominant group, the behaviours that had accompanied this were also seen as leading to lost opportunities for social and economic success and self-development.

Some of the young men who had decided to leave school early despite associating this with a sense of failure qualified their choice by saying that they were only leaving the education system temporarily. Nick, for example, was 'going to look for an apprenticeship' whilst 'earning money in the factory because my dad has connections there and they will employ me'. However, common statements such as 'it is hard to find apprenticeships these days' (Ryan; Thomas; Nick) suggest that the young men were aware that their plans of re-entering

the education system at a later time in their lives may not materialise. This finding is similar to the observation by Nairn, Higgins and Sligo (2006) that all their participants sustained a belief in returning to education. It suggests that maintaining a belief in returning to education provided the young men with a sense of dignity in the face of the uncertainty that characterises the secondary labour market.

There were, however, students who to some degree were able to overcome these barriers. Paul, for example, had decided to continue on to years 11 and 12 despite difficulties in engaging with the formal curriculum. Paul explains how his lived experiences of exploitation and repetitive manual labour were central to his determination to continue his education:

For a couple of months I got up at 3pm to go and get the cows in and milk. I got home around 7pm, I had breakfast and a shower and then I would go to school. I was really tired because it is hard to milk and I would leave school at 2pm to go and milk again. But I don't do that anymore. I only did for some months and they paid me \$8.50 per hour. I've quit the job. It was hard demanding work, physical, I had to do a lot more than just looking after the sheep; I had to set up everything, sometimes there would be sheep that would break fences so I had to fix them. It was interfering with my school work, and it got to a point where I couldn't move. I was so tired. I was getting up at 3am sometimes. I stayed in bed for a week to get over it. Just sleeping, all the time. I didn't like the boss, and my uncle was the manager and I could work with him 'cause I know him fairly well, but just not the boss. He would tell me to do one thing and then he would say I didn't do it properly and then I had to start again. Sometimes I did it better than him. I am going to do years 11 and 12. Then I want to go to TAFE and get an apprenticeship as a diesel mechanic. I just got to go to college first so I can get a good education.

The significance of Paul's lived experience of the hardship associated with working in the secondary labour market was the personal knowledge he gained of unskilled manual labour. This experience changed his perception of early school leaving so that his sense of risk associated with leaving school early increased and fear of further education decreased.

Other young men from wealthier backgrounds experienced the decision to leave school early differently from young people from working class backgrounds. This group of young men were typically moving into the family business, while a few members of this group had contacts through their family which allowed them to enter jobs that they saw as providing

opportunities and security for the future. At the time of the study there were a number of young men from different year levels who frequently told their teachers that ‘I am going to leave to work on the family farm which one day will be mine’ (Luke; Ms Carpenter) and Stephen contended that:

I love the place. I want to be here for the rest of my life. I’ve got a job so I’m leaving. Mum and dad knew some people and that’s how I got the job. I did the interview and it went well and I got the job. It’s a bit of everything ‘cause they like to call it multi-skilled. It’s a government job too so it’s pretty good. Good pay and later on they might put me through TAFE, to get some certificates. A job you will rather leave school for than the factory job. I’ll be outdoor, doing physical work, I know the people who work there and I get along well with them. Doing different things each day.

The secure future contemplated by Luke and Stephen stemmed not from the opportunities afforded by Hillsville’s labour market, but from their local social and economic capital which provided insurance against academic failure. A number of those young men shared with their less well-off counterparts a lack of the kind of cultural capital valued by the school, but for them the decision to leave was a positive one because their future lay with the family business or in a secure, permanent job with opportunities for career development.

The group of young men who had decided to leave school early to work in the family business was only small but sociologically interesting because of the way in which they illustrate how neoliberal and traditional messages about self-responsibility can converge in a message about the importance of individual achievement. Nick and Thomas, for example, made the comment that ‘out here [in the country] it is still possible to work your way up’ and both John and Phillip emphasised that ‘[in the country] it is still possible to create your own opportunities’. This perception was reinforced both inside and outside the school environment. A young man in Year 8 asked his teachers why he should care about education as he already had an asset of four million dollars and was going to continue working in the family business as soon as he was able to leave school. On another occasion I joined a group of years 8 to 10 students on a trip to a local farm business. One young man was familiar with one of the managers who had started ‘sweeping the floors’ in the business and now worked in a management position. The whole group gathered around the man, some asking him lifestyle questions such as ‘Do you have money to buy a boat?’, ‘Do you often go on holidays?’ and ‘Are you rich?’. This manager was the subject of much admiration, and sparked conversation

about opportunities after Year 10, including the questioning of the value of formal qualifications when one can be 'rich like him'. Despite the real opportunities for a few young men from middle class backgrounds to take up permanent and secure work in the family business, this was not an option for the majority of Hillsville's young people. Nevertheless, these stories confirmed dominant constructions of the countryside as resourceful and resilient (Burchardt 2002; Keith and Pile 1993; Little and Austin 1996), and contributed to the legitimisation of the choice to leave school early.

Their location in a local rural habitus characterised by tight local networks, attachment to place and adherence to a particularly physical form of hegemonic masculinity generally distinguished the young men who had decided to leave school early, or who were undecided. The dialogue between Gary and Phillip below develops the understanding of the factors influencing choices to leave or stay in education:

Gary: I'm getting a job. At the factory. I'll buy a car and a motorbike. That's all I want. Dad works there so that's why I can get a job there. I can get a lift with him to work, I save petrol. I save everything...I actually never wanted to get a job there. I never heard of it until dad started working there.

Phillip: I'll go to Year 11 in Hillsville next year. Do a photography course. I'll see how far I can take that. I spoke to dad and my grandma and stuff. She wants to know everything. Grandma wants me to go to Maritime College but I don't have brains for that. She wants to know about everything. I visit her in Hobart sometimes.

MS: Did you talk to anyone about your choice, Gary?

Gary: Yeah I talked to mum, dad.

MS: What did they say?

Gary: Yeah, do it.

Whilst Phillip's choice to 'give Year 11 a go' is framed by his conversations with his dad and grandma and his lived experiences outside Hillsville, Gary's choice to leave is clearly situated within a localised form of social and cultural capital where his parents either support his choice or are unable to assist him in making a different choice. Gary himself furthermore perceives the choice to obtain work in the local area as of benefit to him socially and financially. Yet there is also a sense of failure in his statement that 'I actually never wanted a

job there...’. This scenario suggests that the local rural habitus is strongly associated with choices to leave school early whilst even sporadic exposure to the area beyond Hillsville provides some degree of protection against early school leaving.

For some of the young men at the bottom of the social hierarchy a decision to leave school as soon as legally possible stemmed not from poor academic performance or failure to comply with the ideals of hegemonic masculinity but from feeling unrewarded for doing schoolwork. This was an experience vocalised by Nick and Thomas in the previous chapter, and their experiences translates directly into the perception that ‘school is a waste of time’ (Nick) and ‘everything is better than school’ (Thomas). Rather than continuing his education Nick was ‘going to look for an apprenticeship’ while working at a local factory where his father also worked and Thomas was planning to ‘go to the mainland to work in the mines’. Whilst their choices were a conscious decision made as a response to the lack of attention and assistance from teachers with their schoolwork, these young men did not feel a strong sense of failure in making this choice. Instead they felt a sense of relief that they were leaving an environment in which they had felt suppressed. This finding mirrors the conclusion by Nairn, Higgins and Sligo (2006) that some young people in their study challenged neoliberal discourses in their transition choices, for example by embracing motherhood as an alternative source of self-development. Because of experiences of marginalisation and a feeling that they had not been supported in their academic endeavours some young men at Hillsville High similarly challenged the idea that engagement with education is a key source of self-development.

The factors and processes underpinning the young men’s choices to leave school early can be placed into three broad categories of association: masculinity as status and prestige; masculinity as resistance; and masculinity as failure. This is shown in the table below.

Table 5: Masculine performance and early school leaving

Masculine performance as status and prestige	Masculine performance as resistance	Masculine performance as failure
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘Teaching is not real work...real physical work’ (John) • ‘We always knew we wanted to get out and get a life and get a job’ (Ralph) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘The school is biased. They always say we should continue our education’ (Thomas) • ‘I don’t want a 9–5, a wife and two kids’ (Robert) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘School is not for me’ (John) • ‘I’m so dumb’ (Phillip) • ‘I have made things worse for myself’ (Ralph)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘Education might get you a job somewhere in an office, but that’s not for me’ (Ryan) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers expect us to do the work without explaining’ (Nick) • ‘We don’t all have that knowledge’ (Thomas) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘I have to make the best of my situation now’ (Ryan) • ‘I need to pull myself together and get an education’ (Paul)
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These categories were not mutually exclusive: the experience of a combination of two or more categories often underpinned the young men’s choices to leave school early. The exceptions to this were individuals from wealthier backgrounds who associated highly physical performances of masculinity with status and prestige. For these individuals, the rejection of the educational knowledge offered by the school was associated with positive feelings because of their knowledge that their involvement in the family business guaranteed them long-term economic rewards.

‘I just got to get away from here’: The cool and quiet girls

Existing research focuses on the experiences of sexualisation and sexual harassment of young women in school settings (Francis and Skelton 2005; Keddie 2009; Kenway and Willis 1998; Kenway and Fitzclarence 1997), but this study directly links these experiences to decisions to leave school early. Susan’s remark that ‘I just GOT to get away from this place and certain people and the way they behave’ indicates that the decision to leave was a strategy to escape what the young women experienced as a form of domination. A conversation between Rose and Trudy illustrates this insight:

Rose: I just want to take some time out after this year.

Trudy: We’ve just had enough of all this.

Rose: I know the owner of a local shop...I might just work there for some time before I go into nursing. Just do something simple...you can talk to customers.

Trudy: I think I will also just get a job for a while...maybe work in the business.

For Susan, Rose and Trudy the experience of being in an environment in which they felt compelled to behave in ways they saw as being inauthentic shaped their desire to leave school early. The young women’s desire to take up paid employment points to a need to engage in genuine, everyday interaction and to gain social recognition and self-respect through their work rather than their appearance. It also suggests that the difficulties of this

group of young women in voicing their concerns with sexuality and relationships in the school context led them to look for other environments in which they could perform a form of femininity more closely aligned with power feminism and DIY and Grrrpower (Aapola, Gonick and Harris (2005).

Getting 'away from everyone' was also a key motivation behind the choice for some quiet girls to leave school early, but their experiences differed significantly from those of their cool counterparts. For the quiet girls it was experiences of feeling marginalised and unrecognised for their efforts at doing schoolwork that underpinned their choices to leave school early. Comments such as 'we just sit there all day' (Anna; Anita, Nina) connected to assertions such as 'all I want is to get away from this place' (Anne) and 'I can't wait to leave' (Anita). The lack of interest in continuing on to years 11 and 12 for this group of young women is closely linked to the young women's experiences that their success in the education system went unrewarded and ignored, and their reasoning that continuing into further education would produce the same result.

The choice of some academically-successful middle class girls to leave school on completion of Year 10 takes place against a statistical backdrop of relatively high Year 12 completion rates by this group of young women. Indeed, these young women's choice to discontinue their education was not embraced by the young women's parents or the school community. Anne's story demonstrates this point vividly. When I first met Anne I perceived her as an academically successful young woman. This observation was confirmed in the teachers' accounts of Anne as an exemplary student, and the prestigious awards granted to her at assemblies, such as a number of excellence in learning awards as well as specific subject awards. However, because of Anne's discomfort with the hegemonic masculinity that dominated the informal school culture, she decided to leave school early, drawing on her social networks to find employment. Anne knew that her parents and the school would not approve of her plans and so she was making them secretly. However, the school became aware of her plans not to continue her education one morning when Ms Johnson, the coordinator of the local business program, excitedly announced that 'Anne has now got herself a job after Year 10. This is the whole purpose of the program - to get young people involved with local businesses'.

This excitement was not shared by the school, even if there was a possibility that Anne's job might lead to a traineeship, and upon learning about Anne's choice she was constantly

scrutinised and publicly questioned by members of staff, especially Mrs Anderson and Mrs Willis. The two teachers had private conversations with Anne, and also openly questioned her decision when passing her in the corridors or in lunchtime breaks, asking questions like ‘Anne, you don’t still want that job, do you?’. Mrs Grant explains how Anne’s parents also objected to her choice to leave in her comment that ‘her parents objected to it, and Mrs Anderson talked to them about it. Did you know her sister goes to the college in Sydney? And her brother is at the private school? She would be the black sheep in the family wanting to go and work...it’s a bit sad [that she won’t be able to leave school] because she really enjoys the field days and the hands-on work’. Mrs Grant here exposes the hierarchy of knowledge operating at the school, and the assumption that the cultural capital possessed by middle class girls does not lend itself to engagement in manual labour. It also exposes the view that Anne’s decision reflects her own characteristics rather than the school culture and the school’s lack of support for her.

Although some young women from middle class backgrounds wanted to leave school early, Anne’s story conveys the important role of parents in shaping their decisions. At the end of the participant observation Anne appeared to have given in to the constant pressures from parents and teachers and was considering continuing on to years 11 and 12:

My parents are just not happy. They think they [the employer] will treat me like a slave and I will get no time off and they just think I’m too young for that...Now I don’t know if I really want it. It’s all a bit much and it’s happened so quickly. It’s just because I said to mum and dad, ‘Oh, it would be good working on the land rather than being at school’ and suddenly they [mum and dad] had this new contact and now it’s all set up. I’m just not sure what to do. For the rest of my life I mean, that’s such a big commitment. I might have to try some different things. I have to start somewhere though. I guess I always have the option of quitting. I’ve really only just turned 16. It will be really hard. I won’t get weekends off. It will be seven days a week. Forever. Oh my god...and that’s where I’m going.

Anne’s story exposes some of the important processes underpinning young rural people’s educational decision making. Her experiences of marginalisation at school and lack of recognition of her academic efforts fuelled her desperate desire to leave school in favour of manual labour. The resistance to Anne’s decision from her parents and the school, however, made her reconsider her choice, but only insofar as her parents manipulated her decision by

arranging a very harsh work contract and convincing their daughter that this is what happens if one does not continue with education. These insights confirm previous findings on how middle class parents utilise their social and cultural capital to influence their children's educational decisions (Devine 2005; Halliday 2009), and highlights the importance of this within a rural context offering few choices.

Whilst Anne's and Anita's choices to leave school early were closely related to their experiences of marginalisation, they were also linked with aspects of the rural habitus. A conversation with Anita and her parents illustrates the role of social capital and embedded and embodied experiences of place in these young women's choices:

Mrs Conrad: Well, even though it's her choice and I understand that she doesn't like school, I think that she also has a lot of brains so I'd like to see her stay on 'cause she has the brains to do it.

Mr Conrad: I think she has the ability to do better...I'm not knocking her idea to have her own sheep farm, but I think she could do better financially and everything if she went into further education.

MS: I saw you [Anita] the other day receiving the academic excellence award. How did you feel about that?

Mr and Mrs Conrad: Yes, exactly.

Anita: I see the point but I don't think I'd enjoy it [years 11 and 12]and what's gonna happen if I don't like it?

Mrs Conrad: I don't think she really realises how clever she is. She just thinks that everybody is like that and we haven't really pushed it...probably the last year we've done it.

Anita's story reveals how her decision to not continue on to years 11 and 12 is strongly embedded in the local, natural world and her commitment to agriculture. From Anita's perspective, a decision to continue her education would result in opportunities for well-paid and secure work, but also in a loss of the activities she considers essential for her health and well-being, such as identification with wide open spaces and feelings of belonging to the family farm.

Anita's parents' vehement resistance to their daughter's decision to leave school prematurely partly highlights how this choice was deemed a form of deviant behaviour for middle class girls, but it is also reflective of changes to the economy and labour market. On numerous occasions Anita spoke of 'changing times' and how it was not possible for her to leave school to work on their farm. Anita's reflections on this generational change mirror the decline of smaller family farms in the context of the pressures of a global economy characterised by rationalisation, increased competition and high entry costs into farming (Muensterman 2009; Productivity Commission 2005; Wheeler et al. 2012). For Anita this development meant that she could not be absorbed into the family farm but was forced to make decisions for herself that were radically different from the choices made by her parents and which she associated with feelings of displacement.

There were other young women for whom the decision to leave school early was made possible through their family's economic and social capital. The choices made by young women like Rose and Trudy to 'take time out' and 'perhaps work in the business' was facilitated by their families' ability to absorb them into the family business or the businesses of close family friends. What distinguished these businesses from agricultural businesses like Anita's family farm was that they were associated with the growing service industries rather than the declining primary industries. For Rose and Trudy, their social connections worked as a safety net which allowed them to make the decision to leave their education, or take some time out of the education system. The decision to leave for Rose and Trudy was similar to the decision to leave for those young men who were going to work in the family business: both groups were cushioned from the negative effects of a lack of educational qualifications by the opportunities provided by the family business. However, the young women's decision to leave was also different from that of the young men. The gendered dimension of this choice particularly meant that it was acceptable for the young women to talk about 'taking time out' and '*perhaps* work in the business' whereas working was essential for a successful performance of hegemonic masculinity and the young men's sense of self.

Career guidance and risks to the self

Both young men and women described their choice to leave their education as a stressful decision. The Pathways Planning program which was implemented at the school and designed to help the young people to develop successful career plans was often perceived by the young people themselves to increase feelings of anxiety about the future. The pressures associated with conformity to socially desired lifestyles, articulating and mapping out one's

individual aspirations was sometimes seen as being exacerbated by participation in the career guidance program. Nina's perception of the Pathways program that 'you got to brag about yourself and how you are so good at everything and I hate that' points to a gap between the young people's high aspirations for themselves and their ability to realise these aspirations.

In line with key critiques of the pathway concept (Wyn et al. 2012; te Riele 2004; Raffe 2001, 2003), the young people felt that the concept of a linear school-work transition was confusing and not in line with the demands of the contemporary labour market. It was felt that the program was disconnected from real life; rather than being able to explore opportunities, a job had to be pinned down at a time in the young people's lives when they were still unsure of what they intended to do in the future. Emily points out that 'when you don't know what you want to do it's hard to choose something', and Sarah ponders that 'you have to pick something. And then we sit down with her [pathway officer] and she says, "Do you like this, do you like that...okay, we can pretend you like this". But what's the point of pretending?'. The feeling that particular educational choices were being made for the young people by teachers and career officers contributed to their lack of enthusiasm for continuing their education.

Other young people explained how the pressure to choose a career option could hinder constructive decision making processes. Phillip comments that 'they wanted me to become an electrician because I said it once and I have now changed my decision and they keep going on about training to become an electrician, and I can't really change it now'. Susan expands on Phillip's thought with her observation that the constant pressure and 'nagging' to make a choice and 'what kind of choice and how...takes all the excitement away'. These stories encapsulate the perception of many of the young people that the overly vocationalistic nature of the career guidance they received did not work to keep them in school, but exacerbated feelings of disengagement with school through the pressure to grow up.

Although some 'successful girls' had expressed a strong desire to leave school early, they also felt the pressure to develop a sound pathway for their futures more than any other individuals. Anita and Anne shed light on some of these concerns shared by members of the cool girls and the quiet girls who were also 'successful girls':

Anne: I want to make a decision but then I hesitate because what if it's the wrong one or something? And everyone here at school, like with the pathway planning and stuff they're like, 'Oh, you got to get a job' but you get the impression that if you just go to

work at a factory then you're not good enough or something, like you got to have a proper job and that.

MS: What's a proper job?

Anita: Well, preferable you should go to uni or college, but if you're not good enough to do that then you should try to get a flash job somewhere, an office job, an inside job I suppose, but I don't want to do that. And it's always like, 'What's your future goals and that'. But it's like if you set your goals and think, 'Oh, I'll do this by then' then it's like you're set up, you got to do that.

Anita: I think when I'm 30 I would like to have my own sheep farm like mum and dad. But I don't know how to get there and what to do in between...I don't know. Really the next couple of years I have no idea. It's hard to be undecided.

Anne: Yeah...I'm just not sure what to do. For the rest of my life I mean, that's such a big commitment. I might have to try some different things. I have to start somewhere though. I guess I always have the option of quitting. I've really only just turned 16.

These thoughts point to a fear of not meeting gendered norms and expectations. This confirms previous research on gender and performance and the pressure placed on girls to be successful (Due et al. 2014; Ringrose 2007), but it also highlights the specific challenges for young rural women for whom 'work in the factory is no longer good enough' and university is far away and a world apart from one's rural habitus. Anita's question 'what if I make the wrong choice' is a pervasive theme amongst these young women. It indicates that the decision to choose not to continue their education was seen as a way to minimise risk in their lives by staying in the local community rather than making risky decisions which may lead to failure. Choosing not to discontinue their education was a way for these young women to minimise risks to the self.

There were also some young people who saw the Pathways program as helping them make decisions to continue on to some form of post-compulsory education. Tina explained how the Pathways officer had helped her to reconsider her initial idea to 'get a straight-out job' to 'what's the point of getting a job when you can go to school and learn more and get a better job?'. In a similar fashion Beverly stressed how she felt supported by the Pathways officer in exploring her future job options, remarking that 'I liked it 'cause she helped you a bit with what you were interested in'. The young people who saw the Pathways Planning program as

helping them to construct their educational choices were all marginalised in the masculine hierarchy and most of them were from the ghetto group. For these individuals the assistance provided by the Pathways officer had contributed to their choices to continue their education in an attempt to move beyond disadvantage.

‘School is the only way forward’: Choices to continue education

Although most of the cool boys and wannabes and some cool girls and quiet girls were making decisions to leave school early, there were also individuals from both of these groups who were choosing to continue their education. All members of the nerds and the ghetto group had also made the choice to continue their education. These different groups shared the experience of a tension between their rural habitus and the choice to continue on to years 11 and 12, but what distinguished the young people who wanted to continue their education from the young people who wanted to leave was their extensive social and cultural capital. The exception to this was the members of the ghetto people who were adamant they wanted to continue their education despite their local networks and knowledges.

For the cool boys and wannabes successful performance of hegemonic masculinity did not necessarily equate to early school leaving. There were some young men who had been successful both on and off the sport field and who made the decision to continue their education. Some of the culturally omnivorous young men like Bruce were able to play the game of competing for the patriarchal dividend while presenting an effortless masculinity (Jackson and Hempster 2009): they pretended to care little about schoolwork yet still succeeded academically and had decided to continue on to years 11 and 12.

Another group of young men from the nerds and the wannabes, including individuals from working class backgrounds, had made the choice to continue their education and did so because they ‘liked learning’ (Stanley) and ‘dad and I have already decided which university is the best’ (Neville). What these students had in common were cultural knowledges and practices which extended beyond the local community. Even weak connections with the area outside Hillsville were associated with choices to continue on to years 11 and 12, as Stanley explains: ‘my aunty lives there...I don’t know her that well, but I can go and see her sometimes’. It was partly the nature of these networks and knowledges that enabled this group of young men to see others who did not value education as ‘idiots’ and ‘ignore’ them. This supported them in sustaining a belief in the legitimacy of their own masculine identity and educational choices.

The influence of parental social and cultural capital on their children's educational decisions was especially evident in the stories of the cool and quiet girls who made the choice to continue their education. Lauren explains that:

Mum didn't go to college when she was young, but she became a social worker when she was older. She has really supported me to continue my own education... Travelling doesn't bother me. I travel 20 minutes to school now anyway. I've got family in the nearest town, Nan and Pop and my other Pop and some friends, and I can stay with them whenever I want.

Emily talks in similar familiar terms about the major towns in the region: 'I've been going every month to many of the larger towns in this area... just shopping and seeing family. When I go to college I'll stay with my nan, there's a bus from her place to the college. And I'll get my own room, a big room and I won't have to worry about cooking tea or anything'. The stories of the young people who had decided to continue on to years 11 and 12 illustrate the role of strong social ties to the world beyond Hillsville in the choice to continue on to further education and training, and the valorisation of a form of cultural capital emphasising the importance of education for social and economic success. These stories also reveal a strong parental presence in the lives of the young people, with 'mum and dad' and their explicit expectations of their children frequently mentioned. This form of social and cultural capital allowed this group of young people to feel comfortable about making the decision to continue on to further education outside Hillsville.

The young people who had the greatest desire to continue their education were the members of the ghetto people because they perceived education to be the 'only way forward' (Harry; Richard). This view was particularly linked to difficult family and personal circumstances, so school was experienced as a way out of severe social disadvantage. Karen encapsulates how this group of young people was determined not to reproduce the destiny of their parents:

Mum wanted me to come and work in the factory where she works. I bloody well don't want to work in a factory. I said no way and dad supported me and dad slapped mum. I wanted to become linguist but then Mrs Norton [Pathways officer] told me it takes many, many years. I don't think I will do that but I don't know what else to do. I'll go to Year 11 and maybe I will work in childcare.

Karen clearly wants to continue her education, despite a disruptive home life, a lack of support from her mother and no clear career plan. In a similar way Erin and Megan, whom like Karen were living through disturbing situations at home, told me that ‘it is different today. Our parents could just go and get a job, but we need an education. We are going to years 11 and 12’. For the members of the ghetto group, the rejection of the masculine hierarchy was accompanied by an acceptance that education provided an opportunity for ‘moving forward’ beyond Hillsville’s limited opportunities and tight social networks. Yet, despite their determination to continue their education, their plans for the future were unclear and lacked familial support. This suggests that the severe levels of distress experienced by these young people might work against this decision, as suggested by previous research (Curtis and McMillan 2008; Mance and Yu 2010); Vinson 2007; Mission Australia 2011).

The self-responsible citizen, self-blame and symbolic violence

One key element of the school’s model of a successful student was the self-responsible citizen, but instead of being associated with continuing education for many students this was linked with early school leaving. The reinforcement of the idea of the self-responsible citizen through a different source of independent worker, the rural worker characterised by self-reliance and success through hard work, meant that Hillsville’s young people’s exposure to the message of the self-responsible citizen was intensified.

The combination of internalised messages of self-responsibility and the difficulties the young people experienced in fulfilling their high aspirations to themselves jeopardised their engagement with and success in education. For young men in particular the internalisation of the idea of the self-responsible student led to a double disadvantage because the disconnect between school and community capital complicated their attempts to engage successfully with independent learning. At the same time economic restructuring made it increasingly difficult for them to embrace traditional notions of the independent rural worker. For many young women the messages on self-responsible citizenship were perceived as a fraud. They were willing to embrace the messages that independent, hard work was important, but because of their experiences of domination and oppression in the classroom they felt unable to work hard, and when they did they found that they were not recognised for their efforts.

The finding that many young men’s feelings of failure and young women’s anxieties about their futures increased because of expectations to take responsibility for their own education and future choices draws attention to the impact of educational policies in the lives of young

people. Although the young participants in this study had internalised the message that education was paramount to their futures, educational policies also had unintended effects. They particularly contributed to the perception of failure as a reflection of personal capabilities rather than acknowledging the connection between educational failure and structural barriers. The young men especially blamed themselves for being unsuccessful at school and for placing themselves in an insecure situation in the labour market. Their feelings of regret and self-blame were a form of symbolic violence because they experienced the decision to leave as a choice and failed to recognise the extent to which it was influenced by some very real barriers to further educational participation. Rather than explaining it in terms of their limited skills to negotiate the transition from secondary to senior secondary education, they individualised the decision, and blamed their choice on their personal failings. The young women's anxious feelings about their futures similarly reflect the symbolic violence exercised over them by educational policies emphasising self-responsibility and entrepreneurship. Whilst they associated this choice with a degree of freedom and escape from suppression, their deeply-felt fear of making the wrong choice reflected their internalisation of the school's messages that a successful individual was one who continued on to further education as a pathway to a prestigious job.

The urge amongst the young participants to create a unique personality and lifestyle through obtaining some degree of celebrity status (Allen and Mendick 2013; Mendick and Allen 2012) presents a direct contrast to their emphasis on formal education as the key way to reach socially desired goals. It indicates that for some young people being famous was perceived to provide opportunities beyond formal education. Being famous was seen as a safeguard against the lack of educational success and the feelings of mediocrity which many young people associated with living in a rural area. To some degree, striving for celebrity status worked to counteract feelings of self-blame through its association with status and privilege.

Educational choice, risk and rural habitus

Whilst the highly individualised aspirations which characterised the young rural respondents also feature amongst many other groups of young people in contemporary society (Hatfield 2005; Stokes and Wyn 2007), the barrier of distance and the social and cultural factors generated by remoteness from major conglomerates played a major role in the way the young people in this study were able to realise their aspirations.

This study provides evidence that aspects of a rural habitus can operate to hinder young rural school leavers from exercising their agency to embrace the knowledges and practices that they see as essential for leading meaningful and fulfilling lives. The rural habitus with its emphasis on close-knit social relations, physical experiences of nature and particular forms of masculinities and femininities was strongly implicated in shaping the young participants' choices. For many young people there was a dissonance between the cognitive understanding that minimising risk meant continuing in education and embodied emotions of both attachment and belonging and fear which meant that leaving home to continue education was seen as more risky than leaving education. Although in many ways the young participants were knowledgeable about the nature of the contemporary labour market, a deeply embedded sense of place, in combination with gendered forms of cultural capital, worked against their capacity and desire to embrace the formal requirements necessary to prepare for this.

The gendered nature of the habitus also shaped the young people's choice to leave or stay. For many young men the contrasting experiences of their desire to engage with their education and understanding that this was important for their futures, wanting to 'get out and get a job' and the association of this with an insecure future points to a tension between their rural habitus, grounded in their embeddedness in forms of masculinity based on physicality, and an emerging identity based on their awareness of new developments on the labour market and the associated importance of credentialism. Although these new developments were recognised by the young men, their capacity to negotiate the transition from secondary to senior secondary education was limited by the nature of the hegemonic form of masculinity they had internalised through their rural habitus.

For many young women the decision to stay in the local community was one which was meant to minimise risk in their lives. Their embedded and embodied experiences of rural life in combination with their experiences of oppression at school were linked with a decision to leave school early, which meant they could remain in a familiar, homely environment and avoid further contact with the education system. This decision was not so much associated with a particular form of femininity as with the domination of hegemonic masculinity on their educational experiences.

The young men and women's accounts of their experiences with the Pathways program revealed that it was seen to do little to minimise the risk many of them associated with enrolling in post-compulsory education. Instead it was often perceived to add further stress to

the lives of the young participants because it was not clear to them how the elaborate plans they were developing could help overcome the risk of leaving their familiar and tight-knit environment or increase their chances of inclusion in the primary labour market. The young people's emphasis on employment as a journey rather than a fixed destination where you 'get stuck' reflects not only their individualised aspirations, but also their awareness of a changing labour market with demands for flexible and multi-skilled workers. This awareness was in contrast to their perception of the Pathways program as locking them into a fixed pathway which had little relevance for the labour market they were about to enter.

Underlying many of the young people's accounts of their aspirations and the difficulties in realising those was a desire to 'have some time out' in order to have a break from the pressure to identify a plan for their future. There was a need to just be for a while, without being someone or something important. This is succinctly captured in Anita's statement 'I don't know what to do. I want to just be around for a while'. However, to just 'be around' for a while is not an option in a globalised, rapidly changing society. Although the desire to have 'time out' has also been expressed by other groups of youth (Nairn, Higgins and Sligo 2006; Nielsen 2012), the tension between aspects of the rural habitus and the requirements for continuing onto years 11 and 12 further contributed to this feeling.

Early school leaving, class and rurality

The findings from this study suggest that particular dynamics operated in Hillsville to influence educational choices. The significance of rurality as a factor contributing to early school leaving is perhaps most strongly evidenced in the sharing of a set of knowledges and beliefs about the local world. Internalised through the habitus, these beliefs were centred on physicality and expressed as a deep attachment to place and identification with particular forms of masculinities and femininities.

The relationship between the nature of the young people's social and cultural networks and their educational choices sheds light on the way young rural people negotiate the transition to post-compulsory education. The finding that extensive forms of social and cultural capital worked to protect young people against early school leaving demonstrates the importance of being connected culturally and emotionally to larger conglomerates in making the transition from secondary to post-secondary education. Even limited connections to the area outside Hillsville helped individuals to make the choice to continue their education. The exceptions to this observation were the decision of some middle class girls to leave school early because

of experiences of being dominated, and the decisions of the most vulnerable young people to continue in the education system in order to ‘move forward’.

Although there was a link between social background and the nature of the young men’s and women’s social and cultural capital, there was no direct correlation between class and educational success and failure or choice. The finding that some young men from the wealthiest backgrounds decided to leave school as soon as legally possible complicates the well-established correlation between class and educational choice. The finding that young men from manual backgrounds had a strong desire to continue their education but ultimately left school early with feelings of failure further complicates the correlation between class and educational choice: it blurs the distinction between adherence to traditional masculinity and valorisation of the education system. The choices of middle class girls to leave school before completion of Year 12 and the decisions of the most vulnerable group of young people to continue their education also present a challenge to the established link between class and educational success and failure or choice.

Some findings also challenge the perception of academic ability as one key predictor of academic success. The feeling of freedom that some young people associated with the decision to leave school early, despite their enjoyment of intellectual work, willingness to do their schoolwork or academic ability, challenges this perception. Similarly, the determination of young people from very disadvantaged backgrounds to continue their education differs from the common understanding that low SES is a strong predictor of early school leaving because of the culture differences between different SES groups. The key concern of both these groups, the lack of interaction and support from their teachers, provides a constructive focus for how to continue to help these students to maintain their positive focus on education and allow them to continue onto further education.

This study investigates how young rural people make their educational choices at the end of Year 10. However, the study is not a longitudinal one and it is therefore possible that the choices the young people expressed to me during the research process differed from the actual choice they made at the start of the new school year. There is, for example, evidence that some individual young women from middle class backgrounds who made the choice to leave school early will continue their education despite expressing the desire to leave. Anne’s story and the stories of the ghetto people are all examples of this. However, whilst Anne’s parents use their global social and cultural capital to persuade her to continue her education, it

is the lack of this kind of parental capital in combination with difficult home lives that may hinder the ghetto people in realising their aspirations towards further education (Curtis and McMillan 2008; Vinson 2007; Mission Australia 2011).

Conclusion: The rural idyll and the tyranny of distance

Introduction

The central conclusion to be drawn from this study is the importance of the rural habitus in the young participants' educational decisions, with the tensions and contradictions within the habitus central to understanding these decisions. I argue that aspects of the rural habitus such as an emphasis on physicality as embodied performance, manifested in activities such as participation in sports and immersion in the natural world, were experienced as positive and meaningful for many young men and women in Hillsville. Yet these aspects also worked against their aspirations to continue their education.

I begin this chapter by highlighting the power of place. I then summarise the characteristics of the rural habitus and its role in the young people's educational decisions. I draw attention to the unintentional effect of contemporary youth and transitional policies to exacerbate young people's feelings of failure and self-blame, and conclude by discussing directions for areas of future research and provide a brief summary of the policy implications arising from this study.

The power of place

The continuing importance of the richness of Hillsville's natural resources framed the young people's experiences with and perceptions of employment. With more than twice the workers employed in manufacturing and 20 per cent more in forestry, fishing and agriculture compared to the state average (Labour Economics Office, Tasmania 2008; ABS 2013a), Hillsville's economy continues to be one based on the primary industries. These characteristics were linked to an environment which emphasised a working class culture and a valorisation of physical power, and which formed the basis of the particular form of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005) that was valued in Hillsville.

Hillsville's isolated location in conjunction with limited public transport and telecommunications (ABS 2013a) highlights how the geographical location of the town interacted with social life to create an insular environment. In this environment few leisure opportunities were available for young people within the town itself, and opportunities for accessing resources outside the town were limited. Sport, in particular football, served as the

main collective social activity and as an important site for establishment and maintenance of social norms and cohesion, especially beliefs and values associated with hegemonic masculinity.

Hillsville's high levels of social inequality (ABS 2008) constituted another form of division in the community and also significantly shaped the young people's experiences of life in a small rural town. The over-representation of one-parent families and labourers in the lowest income groups, and two-parent families and professionals in the high income groups indicate that high levels of both privilege and disadvantage in Hillsville distributed along the lines of gender, class and family also underpinned the young people's experiences of rural life.

Key findings

This study has aimed to contribute to an understanding of the factors underpinning the low completion rates of year 12 in rural Australia through a focus on a group of young people's experiences of life in a small rural town in Tasmania. In particular, this thesis has aimed to emphasise how these young rural people's subjectivities intersect with their social environment to influence their decision to leave the education system or commence some form of post-compulsory education. Three key questions have addressed this aim in their focus on the processes by which the young participants subjectively construct their post-compulsory educational choices, the influence of their immediate social environment, education policy and the labour market. This holistic approach has provided considerable insights into the processes which underpin these young people's post-compulsory educational choices. It is hoped that some of these insights will inform policies and strategies designed to increase Year 12 participation.

This account of how young people living in one rural setting in Tasmania make choices about whether or not to continue on to post-compulsory education suggests that the reasons for the high rates of early school leaving in rural areas are complex and cannot be explained only, or even principally, as arising from low socio-economic status. Although a body of literature has explored how rurality shapes young people's educational decision making, the research does not provide an answer to the question of the strength of the contribution of rurality as a factor influencing these choices (James et al. 1999; Jones 2002).

To capture the role of rurality in the young people's lives this study utilised an ethnographic approach. This approach helped to capture the participants' values and beliefs and the

relationship with their educational choices through a period of participant observation and in-depth interviews. My own immersion in the young people's everyday lives through the period of participant observation in the local school was especially useful in capturing the complexities and tensions experienced by the young people themselves and bringing their stories to life. This study used the concept of the rural habitus to help explain the young people's educational choices. While this concept is rooted in Bourdieu's ideas of the habitus, this was extended to incorporate the way characteristics of the rural environment became deeply embedded in the consciousness of the young participants. The use of Bourdieu's concepts, combined with Connell's insights into gender and Simmel's thoughts on rural and urban life, provided deep insights into the way the young people negotiated their educational choices and how these choices were shaped by their immediate social environment, the education system and the labour market. Through the development of the concept of the rural habitus the influence of these factors could be examined. For example, the analysis of the young people's immediate social environment showed a clear connection between the nature of their social and cultural capital and their educational choices. In general young people with more global forms of social and cultural capital tended to make the decision to continue their education whilst individuals who possessed a social and cultural capital of a more local nature tended to make the choice to leave school early. To a high degree the young people who possessed a local form of cultural capital experienced a tension with the cultural capital of the School whilst the young people who possessed a more global form of cultural capital were able to successfully negotiate the education system.

The use of the concept of the rural habitus also made it possible to highlight how the intersection between class, gender and rurality shaped the educational decisions of the young people, and how particular constellations produced deep seated processes of social exclusion based on class and gender in Hillsville. For example, although most of the young people whose networks and knowledges extended beyond the local area wanted to continue their education, some young men and women decided to leave school early because of their experiences of marginalisation in the masculine hierarchy and a sense that their academic efforts went unnoticed and unrewarded. Most of the young people from the ghetto group, whose networks and knowledges were very local, expressed a strong desire to continue their education as a way to move beyond disadvantage. However, this study and the exiting literature (Curtis and McMillan 2008; Mance and Yu 2010); Vinson 2007; Mission Australia 2011) suggest that this group of young people did not possess the social, cultural and

economic resources to support this decision. The following sections provide a more extensive overview of the findings on the role of the rural habitus in shaping the young people's lives and their educational experiences and choices.

The rural habitus and social cohesion

Bourdieu's (1990) concept of the habitus was used to theorise how rural culture and place become embodied in the individual through the internalisation of community knowledge. The idea that the social practices of the individual are a product of the encounter between the individual and the structures of their social environment is captured in the definition of the habitus as a set of dispositions which are inculcated and internalised in the individual through symbolic violence and manifested and perpetuated in the social practices of the individual (Harker 1984: 119). Thus, the concept of the habitus helps to explain how the objective social reality of rural life and the internalised subjective worlds of individuals are inextricably bound together to produce particular experiences and educational choices.

The simultaneous constitution of the habitus within the family and by external experiences means that the conditions of existence can appear widely varied to the individual; but it does, however, also produce certain ways of looking at the world and operating in it. This is what Bourdieu calls the 'class ethos' which is manifested in the differing dispositions of the different classes (Bourdieu 1990: 50 and 87). This collective dimension of the habitus was used as a lens to theorise a rural habitus which worked to provide the individual with a set of objective rural probabilities and subjective expectations. Drawing on Bourdieu's idea of the habitus as a set of dispositions which are inculcated and internalised in the individual through symbolic violence and manifested and perpetuated in the social practices of the individual (Harker 1984: 119), this study has developed the notion of a rural habitus grounded in the intersection of class, gender and rurality. The conceptualisation of the rural habitus particularly drew on the feminist critique that Bourdieu's notion of a class based habitus neglects to take into account other features such as gender, ethnicity and location (Adkins and Skeggs 2004; McCleod and Yates 2006; McNay 2000; Schipper 2007) in the attempt to understand how gender and rurality form part of the rural habitus and influence the educational decisions of young rural people. There was a particular intersection between class, rurality and gender in Hillsville which shaped the young people's habitus and its features. Characteristics of the rural habitus that contributed to the way the young people engaged with education included: a high level of social capital through knowledge of and

close relationships with other community members; a cultural capital centred on physicality; embeddedness in nature through interaction with the natural environment and its inhabitants; a belief in self-sufficiency; and identification with a particular form of hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity.

The high level of social capital in Hillsville was similar to other rural areas in Australia in its association with *gemeinschaft* and a strong sense of belonging to the local area (Bourke 2001; Kenway, Kraack and Hickey-Moody 2006; Wierenga 2009). In this study the role of social capital in producing ‘a personality of an unambiguous image of himself in the eyes of the other’ (Simmel 1950), grounded in the participants’ frequent and prolonged associations with other people in their community, helps to explain how attachment to place occurred through a process similar to Cooley’s (1998) idea of the looking-glass self.

This research also suggests that the tight-knit relations in the community formed the basis of an informal aspect of the rural habitus. In particular, the blurring of age boundaries which was associated with a breakdown of hierarchies such as young and old and students and teachers was facilitated by the tight-knit networks in the community and their association with knowledge of other community members. The existence of an emic form of communication similar to Bernstein’s (1971) idea of the restricted code and Bourdieu’s (1990) concept of linguistic capital also reflects an informal dimension of the habitus in the importance of shared assumptions and taken-for-granted knowledge. The young people’s frequent use of phrases such as ‘you know what I mean’ highlights how a vast amount of meaning is conveyed in a few words and externalised in a form of short hand language and worked to reinforce feelings of inclusiveness and solidarity with the community.

The high level of social capital in Hillsville was also linked to the valorisation of a particular form of cultural capital based on the celebration of physicality. This feature of the rural habitus was linked to the traditional working class culture and continued access to manual employment in the community. The intersection of social and cultural capital in Hillsville was especially revealed in the young men’s stories. Their desire to establish ‘a real life’ in the world of manual labour, as well as their understanding that schooling provided an opportunity to build social capital which could lead to manual employment opportunities in the local community, illustrates the intersection of social and cultural capital and its role in generating particular educational and employment aspirations.

The value placed on physicality was strongly tied to work, but it was particularly in the area of sport, a key area for the construction and maintenance of masculinity (Connell 2000; Swain 2006), that the link between the celebration of physicality and a particular form of masculinity was most obvious. Sports, especially footy games, were an important arena in which rural and working class masculinities intersected to showcase a highly physical form of masculinity. The role of sport in facilitating social interaction in the community reinforced the privileged status of physical performances.

The young people's interactions with the natural environment further established the centrality of physicality to the rural habitus through their experiences of embeddedness in nature. Whilst the rural habitus was one accustomed to close-knit and well-known associations and familiar knowledges, respondents also spoke about their familiarity and attachment to wide-open spaces, a feature of rural life that has also been reported in other studies (Fabianson 2006; Leyshon 2008; Wierenga 2009; Wyn 1998). This study identifies distinctive and durable dispositions of feeling at home in an open environment which were produced through embeddedness in the local area. This was accompanied by deeply embodied experiences in the wilderness where physical and visual experiences demanded immediate attention and added a degree of slowness to life. The rural environment was perceived as an environment where a more authentic lifestyle of 'catch[ing] bugs in your undies without the neighbours watching' could be lived. For most of the young people life in Hillsville was perceived to provide a freer, more authentic and unrestricted lifestyle than life in metropolitan areas.

The understanding that rural life provided a more authentic lifestyle was not only linked to Hillsville's lower population density but also to the everyday interaction with the natural environment. For many of the young people the sense of embeddedness in the local area was further increased by deeply embodied experiences of nature. The strengthening of their bond to the local area took place through activities such as caring for wild animals, nurturing young farm animals, hunting or camping. These embodied experiences supported feelings of embeddedness in the local area through interactions with the local natural environment and its non-human inhabitants.

Some young people's rural habitus became further anchored in the local area through their very real contributions to the family unit's health and wellbeing, such as rearing calves, fighting fires on the property, cutting wood or hunting for food. Such experiences confirm the

continuing importance of elements of traditional agrarian ideology in Hillsville (Gray and Lawrence 2001). The aspect of self-reliance became an especially valued part of the rural habitus because of its connection with the maintenance of the family unit through the performance of particular physical skills and activities.

Although physical performances were part of the local rural habitus for both young men and women, young men tended to participate in activities that were more physically challenging than young women. This link between physicality and its relationship with constructions of dominant masculinities and subordinate femininities is well established (Connell 2000; 2005; Kimmel and Messner 1989), but Hillsville's isolated location meant that local masculinities and femininities were shaped by the area's social and geographical features, which contributed to the generation of specific patterns of domination and subordination.

It is widely agreed that gender is fluid and changeable and that the specific resources and opportunities available in a particular social context work to produce unique forms of masculinities and femininities (Connell 2005; Gilbert and Gilbert 1998; Swain 2006). In Hillsville the construction of hegemonic masculinity around engagement with physical and manual labour, high contact sports and engagement with place-specific activities such as hunting, shooting and wood cutting help to shed light upon how dominant forms of masculinities are constructed and maintained by monopolising resources considered valuable and prestigious by the local community. In Hillsville the domination of a highly physical form of masculinity was rooted in the community celebration of physicality as manifested in the importance of manual work, sport and local activities such as wood cutting and hunting. Other forms of masculinities characterised for example by an interest in education, intellectual ability, music or homosexuality were immediately marginalised in Hillsville's gendered hierarchy.

In the community the young women's exclusion from the manual labour market and high contact sports such as football and basketball meant that they often performed supporting roles, such as nurturing sick animals or being spectators to the performances on the sports field. The data contains similarities to Bryant's (1999) notions of 'feminine pride' and 'masculine pride' in the importance of nurturing and physical roles in the lives of the young people. However, these experiences co-existed with other experiences of femininity such as performances of a form of hyper femininity similar to Connell's (2005) concept of emphasised femininity. Other young women responded to the dominance of hegemonic

masculinity in the community and the informal school culture by performing an invisible form of femininity (Sacks 1983). Despite many young women's performances of either an invisible form of femininity or emphasised femininity their concerns about expressing their femininity in these ways included issues such as sexualisation, exploitation and a lack of opportunity to participate in education. In voicing their concerns with these issues the young women demonstrated how they also drew on power femininsm or DIY and Grrrpower feminism in constructing their identities (Aapola, Gonick and Harris 2005).

The nature of the young people's social and cultural capital also mediated their experiences of life in Hillsville. The link between the role of a local form of social and cultural capital in shaping a habitus deeply embedded in the local area and views on the city as a dangerous place highlight the role of the rural habitus in the young people's decisions to continue in education in another town. In contrast social and cultural practices which extended beyond the local area produced a more omnivorous habitus characterised by a higher degree of cosmopolitanism. Individuals who possessed more global forms of social and cultural capital typically felt at ease in the city, embracing its opportunities for anonymity and assertion of a more individualised form of identity.

Class, gender, rurality and social division

Like other rural spaces Hillsville was constructed as a classless community with the purpose of positioning particular groups and their beliefs as legitimate whilst marginalising and pathologising the experiences of others (Pini and Leach 2011). Constructions of the community as egalitarian and classless were facilitated through participation in sport, especially football, as the key cultural event of the community. The young people's stories of 'everyone likes sport', 'dad is the umpire' and 'mum does the cooking' paint a picture of the involvement of all the town's residents and their equally valued contributions to sporting events. Thus, despite the participants' emphasis on the *gemeinschaft* qualities of the community, it contained very real divisions, tensions and ambiguities.

The construction of insiders and outsiders in Hillsville was strongly influenced by conformity and non-conformity to dominant gender behaviours. Whilst the link between marginalisation and gender non-conformity is not new (Connell 2005; Pascoe 2007), the consequences of this were particularly severe in the small isolated community. The celebration of highly physical, aggressive and competitive practices that characterised sporting events meant that young people already marginalised in the cultural hierarchy because of their perceived lack of

characteristics compatible with the dominant form of masculinity became excluded from participation in sports. In turn they were also excluded from participation in the general life of the community because of the prominent role of sporting events in facilitating social interaction in the town. The young people's further marginalisation through the lack of access to other forms of organised leisure activities or means of self-expression also highlights the importance of place in young people's identity construction. These young people's experiences of social withdrawal and 'hanging around' draws attention to the urgent need to provide a wider range of leisure activities for young people in rural Australia.

The intersection between gender and class also played a key role in shaping patterns of cohesion and division in Hillsville. The ghetto people were constructed as incompatible with even marginalised forms of masculinities and to some extent femininities because of the deeply entrenched nature of their social and cultural networks in the local community. Whilst also reflective of broader societal patterns of marginalisation and social background (Vinson et al. 2007), the labelling of this group of people as deviant was firmly grounded in the features of the rural habitus. The stigmatisation of members of the ghetto people occurred in particular because of their association with low geographic mobility and dependency on income support and public housing; this was seen to violate key characteristics of the rural habitus such as hard work, competitiveness and self-reliance. The ghetto people's difficulties in embracing these qualities because of a mixture of poverty, unemployment and difficult family circumstances meant that they were cast as 'lazy' and 'dirty' and placed at the bottom of the cultural hierarchy and excluded from participation in key cultural community events. The ghetto people's exclusion from participation in the most prestigious forms of sports worked as a form of double disadvantage because it prevented them from buying into the valued currency of physical performance, which afforded status in the town and thereby reinforced patterns of privilege and disadvantage in the community.

The finding that the young men involved with the sporting community also felt a sense of exclusion is central to fully capturing the young people's experiences of living in a small rural town. This group of young men's understanding that participation in sport and the performance of a highly physical form of masculinity worked to disadvantage them from participation in the social and cultural world beyond Hillsville suggest that they associated the characteristics of the rural habitus with a sense of marginalisation. Feelings of inferiority stemming from the town's isolation from the resources, entertainment and opportunities available in larger conglomerates demonstrates the gap in the young men's desire to acquire a

metropolitan form of identity which was seen as essential for successful participation in the new economy and the consumption patterns of the city, and their actual ability to embrace this form of identity.

The role of sport as a key a source of division in the community challenges the emphasis on the strong potential for sport to build inclusiveness and coherence in rural areas that dominates rural community research (McHenry 2009). This finding adds knowledge to the small body of literature that provides insights into the contradictory nature of sport in rural Australia (Spaaij 2009; Tonts 2005) by highlighting how the intersection between class, gender and rurality and their interaction with various social institutions can generate complex patterns of inclusion and exclusion.

The informal school hierarchy and educational choices

Choices not to commence some form of post-compulsory education were particularly influenced by the specific barriers to learning created by the rural habitus, especially for the young men. The type of hegemonic masculinity that was shaped in the intersection of class, gender and rurality became the major determinant of the values and social practices – namely anti-intellectualism and valorisation of a highly physical culture – which was carried over into the school to influence educational choices. The entanglement of this form of masculinity in the formal and informal culture of the school contributed to choices to leave school early for both young men and women. Both students and teachers carried their perceptions of and beliefs in this kind of masculinity into the school environment. Youdell's (2006) idea that student subjectivities are simultaneously constituted by students and teachers help to explain how some students become constituted as 'bad' or 'inappropriate' learners. For example, the cool boys often expressed their lack of interest in learning through language and body language, thereby constituting themselves as 'bad' learners. The School and teachers reinforced this perception by endorsing highly physical and aggressive practices on the sporting field, lacking the power to challenge this behaviour in the classroom and expecting the habitus of all students to be compatible with a highly entrepreneurial learning style.

Practices associated with the culturally exalted hierarchy (Connell 2005) at Hillsville High, such as anti-intellectualism and highly physical performance, to a large extent affected attitudes to academic study amongst the most dominant groups. Disengagement with

schoolwork formed part of the establishment of an anti-intellectual culture, the purpose of which was to circumvent the formal academic culture of the school and portray a more physical culture as superior. For many young men highly physical performances in the classroom worked to establish and maintain privilege and prestige both within and between groups; sexualised performances were a key form of control within the student group because these silenced other forms of behaviour and resulted in a patriarchal dividend – acknowledgement from the cool boys (Connell 2005: 79).

For many young men their successful performance of this form of place-based hegemonic masculinity was in tension with the cultural capital of the school and was associated with an intention to leave education as soon as they could. However, the finding that this choice was associated with feelings of failure and self-blame for ‘not making the most of it’ indicates a desire to engage with the cultural capital of the school and a declining commitment to hegemonic masculinity as a feature of the rural habitus. The contrast between feelings of failure experienced by the young men in this study and the young men in early studies of early school leaving (Willis 1977; Walker 1988; Connell 1982) who felt proud to leave school to work in manual employment demonstrates social change in the effects of neoliberal ideology in contemporary society and attempts by the school to construct young people as neoliberal workers (Nairn, Higgins and Sligo 2006). The effect of these societal changes on the young men in this study was a tension in their identity between a more intellectual form of identity and their daily experience as modern rural manual worker.

The feelings of disillusionment with education that characterised the young individuals marginalised in the informal school culture were also linked to decisions to leave school before completion of Year 12. These individuals included members from the lower end of the wannabes, the quiet girls and the nerds. It is known that a lack of attachment to school is associated with disengagement and decisions to leave school early (Taylor and Nelms 2006; Willms 2003) and that teachers are vital in facilitating a sense of belonging to the school community (Lingaard, Mills and Hayes 2002; Rowe and Rowe 2000; Beutel 2010), but this study develops these observations in a rural context. For many young people feelings of marginalisation at school were reinforced by the use of sport in the school context, for example as a reward for completing schoolwork, because the valorisation of sport and the use of highly physical practices worked to maintain the legitimacy of the dominance of hegemonic masculinity within the school.

The blurring of public and private boundaries between some students and their teachers also contributed to feelings of marginalisation for some members of the cool girls and the quiet girls, the nerds and the ghetto people. In particular, relationships between the cool boys and the wannabes and some of their teachers, through friendships and shared activities such as participation in sport, worked to increase other students' sense of marginalisation. This provides insights into a divisive aspect of rural culture that Tonts (2005) calls the dark side of social capital, and its connection with decisions to leave school early through processes of exclusion and marginalisation.

Whilst the decision to leave school early was linked to the possession of tight-knit local networks and local forms of knowledge, there were also exceptions. Some academically high-achieving individuals with global forms of social and cultural capital still decided to leave their education because of experiences of marginalisation. The deviation of this observation from the well-established finding that early school leavers are mainly individuals from working class backgrounds (Fullarton et al. 2003; ACARA 2012) can be partly explained by the unique dispositions and values of the young people's rural habitus. The observation that some young males from the wealthiest backgrounds shared with their less well-off counterparts a rural belief system and a lack of the kind of cultural capital valued by the school lends support to the idea that rurality is a significant influence on decisions to leave school early. The strong effect of the domination of hegemonic masculinity in the classroom in combination with a deep attachment to place also helps to explain the decision of some educationally successful young women to leave the education system prematurely.

Despite the trend of decisions to leave school early to include young people from a variety of social backgrounds, class mediated responses to the decision not to continue on to post-compulsory education. Amongst the young men the choice to leave school early was associated with features of the rural habitus such as tight-knit local networks and embodied experiences of work and interactions with nature. However, the finding that young males from wealthier backgrounds associated their choice to leave as a positive one and young men from working class backgrounds tended to associate their choice with a feeling that they were setting themselves up for failure especially illuminates the intersection between class, gender and rurality. The effect of the opportunities afforded by the family business cushioned young people from privileged backgrounds against the risks associated with leaving school early such as unemployment and poverty, and shaped their interpretation of the choice to leave as a positive one. In contrast, a negative interpretation of the choice to leave was linked to the

working class background of other young men and their knowledge of the labour market and the need to gain educational qualifications. Yet their rural habitus worked against their desire to embrace the cultural capital of the education system.

Although the young women choosing to leave school early shared with many young men a tension between excitement about leaving school and regret for this choice, the dynamics underpinning the young women's feelings about their educational choices differed from those of the young men. For many of the young women, escaping the domination by the cool boys and wannabes was seen as a positive choice and a key reason for not continuing in the education system. At the same time the young women felt anxious about not continuing on to post-compulsory education and not fulfilling the expectation of the successful girl (Ringrose 2007). Although these feelings were shared by young women from a variety of backgrounds, there were subtle differences in the young women's reactions to them. The young women whose families owned their own businesses associated the choice to leave with less anxiety than other young women because of the protection against unemployment and poverty provided by these businesses and their ability to absorb the young women for an unspecified period of time. Constructions of femininity as compatible with academic endeavours furthermore meant that many of the young women with local networks decided to continue on to Year 11 'to see what happens' rather than leave their education completely as the young men planned to do.

Although explored in one body of research (Francis and Skelton 2005; Keddie 2009; Kenway and Willis 1998; Kenway and Fitzclarence 1997), the impact of the dominance of hegemonic masculinity in the informal school culture on other young people, especially young women, cannot be overstated. The use of highly sexualised performances and language as tools to silence any questioning of the authority of masculine practices in the school environment worked as a powerful way to maintain status quo. The place-based language that characterised the sexual tactics used by many young men as a tool to dehumanise and repress other young people was particularly powerful in maintaining the social hierarchy because of the use of locally shared meanings and understandings. The image of the cow, for example, which was used to systematically bully one young girl, immediately conjured up images of oversized breasts and reproductive organs. These features of the domesticated cow which were manipulated and handled on a daily basis on the farms and used for commercial purposes were routinely used to denote the young women's place in the student hierarchy as passive individuals and sexual objects.

Underpinning the subjective experiences of education for students as well as teachers and parents were experiences of failure, exclusion and marginalisation. This clear pattern of inequality and oppression calls for a teaching approach that can effectively expose and address the operation of power in an educational context to empower individuals to think critically and achieve emancipation through challenging oppressive structures. The approaches to teaching taken by the teachers in this study ‘to wipe the slate clean everyday’ (Mr Marshall) or ‘organise the students in groups’ (Mrs Willis) or ‘talk to the students about things that interests them’ (Ms. Dawson) highlights their moral commitment to engage their students in learning. Yet, this aim is compromised by their lack of awareness of the power relations underpinning the young people’s learning experiences.

The experiences of the participants in this study lend support to teaching practices associated with a critical pedagogy in its aim to expose the inequalities and power relations inhibiting educational engagement (Apple 2006; 2004; Freire 1973; 2000; Giroux 1981; 1985). Freire’s assertion that teachers must recognise how power works in schools and bring an awareness of how schools can strengthen or thwart critical thinking for their students connects with the experiences of the teachers themselves, but also with those of their young students. The symbolic violence experienced by the cool boys and the wannabes, the ‘power which manages to impose meanings and to impose them as legitimate by concealing the power relations which are the basis for its force’ (Bourdieu 1990: 4), draws attention to the need to question the role of the existing social order and the role of education in society. The many pleas from the young people marginalised in the culturally exalted hierarchy at Hillsville High for their teachers to ‘do something’ suggest that a conceptualisation of teachers as agents of change would aid the young people’s already well-articulated sense of oppressive structures. Developing an understanding of one’s role as oppressor and oppressed or both has the potential to support the young people as social agents in society (Freire 1973; 2000).

The tension between the rural habitus and metropolitan identity

The rural habitus played a central role in shaping the young people’s contradictory experiences and choices. It contained elements of traditional agrarianism (Craig and Phillips 1983) and the rural idyll (Little and Austin 1996) through the emphasis on the idyllic nature of Hillsville and its superiority to urban society and all its stresses. At the same time many young people also associated it with a lack of ability to engage in practices reflective of a metropolitan lifestyle which they saw as central to their success in education. These insights

suggest that a tension between the impact of globalisation and the young participants' rural habitus is central to understanding the ambiguities they experienced in their lives and which shaped their educational experiences and choices.

Simmel's (1950) distinctions between the social and cultural characteristics of individuals residing in the modern metropolis and in the countryside help to shed further light on some of the tensions experienced by many of the young people. Although relatively dated, Simmel's (1950) theory that rural individuals who have not embraced the blasé attitude that characterises urban residents may be overwhelmed by a sensory overload in the city connects with many of the young people's descriptions of the city as 'too busy'. The young people's perceptions of the city and its people as immoral can be partly explained by the rational and instrumental nature of the interactions taking place in the city, and the contrast of these to the rural unambiguous identity and experiences of prolonged and personal associations internalised through the rural habitus. Although the lives of the young individuals in this study were shaped by globalisation to a much greater extent than those living at the time of Simmel's writing, their deeply embedded experiences of rural life generated particular reactions to urban lifestyles which indicate the continuing importance of the rural–urban divide in contemporary Australia.

The coexistence of the young people's perceptions of the city as 'dirty' and 'too busy' alongside descriptions of it as a place of 'excitement', 'opportunity' and autonomy indicates that a contrast between their rural habitus and desire to acquire a more metropolitan lifestyle lies at the heart of many participants' decisions to leave school early. On the one hand key characteristics of the rural habitus such as high social capital and informality meant that the young people interpreted features of metropolitan identity such as the blasé attitude as 'uncaring', 'selfish' and unauthentic. On the other hand they interpreted other attributes of metropolitan identity such as connoisseurship and cultural omnivoreness as important because of their awareness that opportunities to participate in the new economy and desirable employment opportunities were increasingly concentrated in the city. Yet they felt that aspects of their rural habitus such as the unambiguous identity and place-based attachment worked against their desire to embrace these features of metropolitan identity.

The young people's stories about their relationships with the city revealed how a complex interplay between structural forces and individual choice influenced decisions to leave school early. On the one hand the young people's fear of the city arose from their feelings of being

ill-equipped to deal with city life because of their rural habitus, as well as the labelling of them as inferior because of their residence in Hillsville. On the other hand choices to leave school early were shaped by a conscious desire to reject the city because of the young people's immersion in and celebration of rural life. The finding that early school leaving is a complex interaction of structural and individual factors that creates challenges for young people negotiating their futures poses particular challenges for educational policy which firstly tend to construct early school leaving as an individual choice, and secondly overlook the factors shaping rural young people's educational decisions.

Education policy and the everyday lives of young people in Tasmania

This study provides evidence that the neoliberal messages that underpin educational policies can work as a form of symbolic violence for some groups of young people, including young people living in rural Australia. Through their emphasis on individual responsibility and entrepreneurship these policies tend to promote the misrecognition of success and failure at school as personal characteristics rather than being deeply embedded in social and economic change (Woodman and Wyn 2013; te Riele 2012). A misrecognition of success and failure as personal characteristics is implicit in policies such as COAG's National Partnership Agreement on Youth Attainment and Transitions, and the proposed changes to Newstart by the Liberal Party through restrictions on welfare benefits for those young people aged 15–20 years who are not engaged in 'earning or learning'. The emphasis placed on individual responsibility in educational policies was evident in the teaching practices and strategies at Hillsville High, for example in the emphasis on individual and self-motivated projects. The lack of acknowledgement of the influence of social forces was associated with a tendency for the young people to blame themselves for not possessing a particular form of cultural capital associated with urban and middle class values, as well as knowledges which they perceived to be essential for successful completion of their education and participation in the new economy. This internalisation of failure worked as a form of symbolic violence detrimental to the young participants' capability to realise their educational and occupational aspirations because of their acceptance that they only had themselves to blame for their failure.

In contrast to Nairn, Higgins and Sligo's (2006) research on the influence of neoliberal ideologies in the lives of young people most of the young men in this study who decided to leave school early did not maintain a belief that they would return to education at a later stage in their lives. Rather, there was a strong sense amongst these individuals that it was too late to

continue their education to improve their employment opportunities. These experiences connect more strongly with the research of Kenway, Kraack and Hickey-Moody (2006) on the impact of globalisation on the masculinity in rural areas, especially the town of Morwell. Because of the closure of many local businesses and the lack of new employment opportunities the participants continued to draw on a traditional form of masculinity which they also associated with a sense of failure because it was perceived as outdated in relation to the new economy. However, in Hillsville many young women associated their choice to leave school with a sense of failure because the construction of young women in late modernity as a 'symbol of progress' (Ringrose 2007). The contrast in these findings draws attention to the relevance of the rural habitus in capturing the intersection of class, gender and rurality in understanding the experiences of rural people in late modernity.

In this study the tension between the absorption of a metropolitan form of identity associated with participation in the new economy and urban consumption patterns versus the anti-intellectualism of the rural habitus was particularly important for the young males. Experiences of symbolic violence were linked to the young men's performances of a form of working class masculinity and the lack of success in establishing a more metropolitan form of masculinity needed to engage with new and abstract knowledge. Despite their desire to do so, their daily experiences in the small rural town did not support a metropolitan lifestyle. Their response to their lack of success in establishing a more personalised (Swain 2006) or inclusive form of masculine identity (Anderson 2009) was a mixture of self-blame and resistance through the familiar practices associated with working class masculinity. The young people's experiences of the school's expectation to construct linear and fixed pathways for themselves further contributed to their feelings of self-blame. This expectation was experienced as confusing because of the tension between the young people's own understandings of the need for flexibility, mobility and creativity on the contemporary labour market and the continuing emphasis on elements of linearity and vocationalism within the School (Olssen et al. 2004). Their understandings that they were required to design a school-work plan that did not necessarily reflect their aspirations or understandings of the skills they needed to acquire to enter the labour market demonstrates how Pathway Planning was experienced as irrelevant, mechanistic and vocationalistic by some young people. The young people's responses to the Pathway program indicate that they saw the vocational approach to schooling as a contrast to the development of the metropolitan identity and 'mobility capital' (Corbett 2007) characterised by mobility and creativity that they saw as essential for their

future educational and occupational success. This experience exacerbated feelings of disengagement with their education through the pressure to become productive citizens in a way which the young people saw as incompatible with the labour market they were entering.

The form of self-blame the young people associated with feeling unable to realise the educational and occupational choices in their pathway plans were especially hard felt by the young women because of their internalisation of the 'successful girl' discourse (Ringrose 2007). Some young women's fear of 'making the wrong choice' and thereby failing to conform to a linear school-work transition led to decisions to leave school early to minimise risks to the self. The young women's fear of 'making the wrong choice' was exacerbated by their rural habitus which shaped their perception of moving away from the local area to continue their education in an unfamiliar urban environment as a risky choice. These young women had carefully weighed up the risks and benefits of staying and leaving. For them the choice to leave school early was a rational choice which did not give them new and exciting opportunities for education and work in the city but neither was it associated with the risk of educational, occupational, economic and social failure.

This study reveals that there are significant areas of current education policy that could connect more deeply with the lives and experiences of young Tasmanian people. Matching educational skills and qualifications to the needs of the knowledge economy to create a healthy and stable society is a key driver of educational policy, at international, national and state levels. However, regarding young people primarily as instruments of economic development has done little to improve educational completion rates and student outcomes. If the low Tasmanian retention and completion rates are to be improved, a broader approach that allows young people to develop the knowledge and skills that will assist them in negotiating the uncertainty and insecurity that permeates contemporary society is needed.

The potential for educational policy to work as a form of symbolic violence may be particularly relevant for Tasmania because of its high proportion of families from low socio-economic status backgrounds and high unemployment and youth unemployment as compared to other Australian states and territories. Fixing educational skills to a volatile labour market with high unemployment is likely to label a significant proportion of young people as engaging in 'unsuccessful transitions' or 'faulty transitions' (te Riele 2004; Wyn and Woodman 2006). The neoliberal ideas of entrepreneurship and self-responsibility that characterise education and transition policy can potentially worsen the outcomes of such

transitions, leading to the misrecognition of social and economic change as personal failure, especially for those from low socio-economic and rural backgrounds who face considerable barriers in their transition to post-compulsory and further education.

It is a paradox that despite the rhetoric of increased flexibility and choice embedded in education policies and their associated programs and initiatives these policies have the potential to leave a significant proportion of young people behind. This is largely due to their narrow and utilitarian approaches, captured for example in the Pathways Planning process. This approach to school-work transitions obscures the nature of the contemporary labour market and its opportunities rather than empowering young people to recognise the broader social forces contributing to the challenging nature of contemporary school-work transitions. Not only is this approach linked to ‘failed transitions’ but also has a potential connection to an internalisation of self-blame and failure which may work to undermine young people’s confidence in their educational and occupational endeavours, hindering for example their re-entry into the education system. In the context of this changing social and economic climate it is essential to ensure that different options are available to young people in the post-Year 10 system by making sure they can move relatively freely between different institutions and re-enter education after periods in the labour market.

Conceiving young people as creative individuals with unique talents able to contribute in many and varied ways to society rather than instruments of economic development seems to be an appropriate way to foster greater educational engagement as a way to improve Tasmania’s low retention rates and outcomes. Such an approach seems particularly useful in the contemporary social and economic climate, which is increasingly unpredictable and insecure. The recognition of the reality of young people’s responses to the nature of the labour market in policy documents is key to their long-term educational and occupational success which has consistently been shown to be increasingly impermanent and reversible (te Riele 2004; Woodman and Wyn 2006; Du Bois-Reymond 1998). Developing a more holistic approach to education (Eckersley et al. 2006; Wyn 2009), which includes broader aspects of health and wellbeing such as social, emotional and spiritual elements seems better suited to give young people the skills to negotiate a volatile labour market and manage their own lives within it than a model predominantly focused on numeracy and literacy. Taking account of the specific combination of Tasmania as a highly ruralised state and its high levels of socio-economic disadvantage, such a model may suit this state particularly well as the creativity, health and wellbeing it promotes could help bring a stalled economy back to life.

Changing rural masculine ideals

The direct influence of globalisation on young people through employment patterns, friendship groups, internet usage, social networking and celebrity culture (Allen and Mendick 2013; Kenway and Bullen 2008; Polesel and Helme 2002) means that it has become essential for this group of individuals to develop a sense of belonging through an understanding of the relationship between global processes and local experiences. In this study many young men's awareness of the trends on the labour market and their sense that they were losing out on important economic and social opportunities because of their relationship with a particular form of hegemonic masculinity is an indication that rural masculine ideals and practices are under pressure to change (Kenway, Kraack and Hickey-Moody 2006). Corbett's (2013) finding that his participants were increasingly replacing a pride associated with staying close to home and surviving turbulent economic conditions with a sense of risk and insecurity confirms the importance of understanding how masculinities are changing in relation to the intersection of global, regional and local dynamics (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005).

The desire of some of the young men in this study to embrace a more metropolitan form of identity in order to enhance their chances of future social and economic success caused a tension between a neoliberal and traditional work identity in the association between wanting to 'get out and get a job' and linking this with a sense of failure and an insecure future. The young men's experiences suggest a difference between their local identity, grounded in their embeddedness in forms of masculinity based on physicality, and an emerging identity based on their awareness of new developments on the labour market and the associated importance of credentialism. These young men's subjective experiences highlight that important developments have taken place since the seminal studies of early school leaving in the 1970s and 1980s, especially those undertaken by Willis (1977), Walker (1988) and Connell (1982). In contrast to the young men in this study, most of whom acknowledged the importance of education and wanted to engage with it, the young men observed in studies in the 1970s and 1980s saw school as irrelevant, effeminate and in direct opposition to manual labour. This change in attitudes and aspirations is closely linked to the powerful influence of individualisation and neoliberal ideology in contemporary society and attempts by the school to construct young people as neoliberal workers. The effect of this social change on the young men in this study was a shift in their identity towards a more intellectual form of identity which was at odds with their rural habitus and daily experiences of and ascribed identity as modern rural manual worker.

It is possible that these shifts in attitudes towards education could lead to an improvement in the low rates of enrolment in post-compulsory education through the weakening of an anti-intellectual culture and increasing recognition of the importance of educational credentials. This change could be supported through the role of the school as a social agent through the surprising finding that, however ambiguous many young men's experiences of their four years of high school might have been, the school was experienced as a relatively supportive environment and teachers were appreciated for 'just wanting the best for us'. Whilst this presents an important platform for policy development, it is essential that the development of student-teacher relations takes into account the social dynamics underpinning young people's ambiguous experiences of life in isolated communities.

Theoretical insights

This study develops Bourdieu's (1990) notion of a class habitus or a 'class ethos' manifested in the differing dispositions of the different classes (Bourdieu 1990: 50 and 87) with the finding that the intersection between class, gender and rurality produced a rural habitus that shaped the young people's views of the world. The importance of features of rural life such as a high level of social capital, a cultural capital centred on physicality, embeddedness in nature, and identification with particular forms of masculinities and femininities in the lives of the young participants illustrates how these young people had internalised a particular set of dispositions. These were manifested and perpetuated in their views and social practices such as 'knowing everyone', interacting with nature and wildlife through activities such as hunting and caring for animals, perceptions of the city, and playing sport.

The notion of a rural habitus expands on Bourdieu's argument that the classed dispositions and inclinations of the habitus shape educational success and failure. The finding that the rural habitus was associated with a particular form of cultural capital centred on physicality that influenced the young people's educational decisions indicates the importance of rurality in educational outcomes. For many young men the intersection between class, gender and rurality was associated with a highly physical form of hegemonic masculinity which created specific barriers to their educational engagement and success.

In highlighting how rurality, class and gender intersected in particular ways through the habitus to generate local forms of gendered behaviour and patterns of domination and subordination, this study also develops the understanding of the social construction of masculinities and femininities. Although early school leaving is associated with performances

of hegemonic masculinity and anti-intellectualism (Corbett 2007; Connell 1982, 2005; Willis 1977; Walker 1988; Morris 2008; Wierenga 2009), it is also widely agreed that masculinities are fluid and changeable and that the specific resources and opportunities available in a particular social context work to produce unique forms of masculinities (Connell 2005; Gilbert and Gilbert 1998; Swain 2006). In Hillsville a highly physical form of masculinity was constructed as the dominant form of masculinity through the combination of traditional working class culture and access to sport as the key leisure activity in the community. Embodied performances of place-based activities such as hunting, shooting and wood-cutting were local pastimes celebrated by the community because of their highly physical nature and contribution to the family unit's health and welfare. The status and celebration of the particular form of hegemonic masculinity dominating gender relations in Hillsville was especially maintained through playing footy because of the centrality of this form of sport in the social life of the town.

Particular forms of femininities were also constructed through access to Hillsville's specific resources. An understanding of the construction of femininities in Hillsville can especially be developed through Little's (2002b) call to 'look at ways in which constructions of rurality [are] performed through the physical qualities and activities of the body'. The larger percentage of young women choosing to continue their education rather than staying in Hillsville to look for a manual job illustrate the perception that physical, manual labour was incompatible with constructions of femininity in Hillsville. The emphasis on sport and the exclusion of females from participation in the most prestigious form of sport, footy, especially contributed to the construction of femininity as subordinate to masculinity. Bryant's (1999) distinction between 'feminine pride', a helping and nurturing role, and 'masculine pride', involvement in physical labour, is relevant to the experiences of Hillsville's young women. Their accounts reveal involvement in activities such as nurturing animals and helping on the farm, as well as a lack of involvement in more physical activities such as hunting, shooting and wood-cutting. The young women's stories also connect with aspects of Sacks's (1983) notion of women as 'invisible farmers', especially in the invisible presence of many young women in the classroom.

In the informal school culture these dynamics were linked to a gendered hierarchy. The valorisation of physicality in the community was reflected in the highly physical form of masculinity performed by the cool boys and wannabes which established the dominance of this form of masculinity to other masculinities such as the intellectual or stigmatised

masculinities of the nerds or the tainted masculinity of the male members of the ghetto people. The quiet girls' adherence to a form of invisible femininity was the most common performance of femininity in the school context, but members of the cool girls performed a hyper sexual version of femininity more similar to Connell's concept of emphasised femininity in their compliance with the needs and desires of hegemonic masculinity. In this study there was only one example of a form of resistant femininity. Karen's performances of resistant femininity were especially influenced by her disadvantaged family background which in Hillsville was deemed largely incompatible with normative constructions of femininity. Because of Karen's outsider status in the gendered hierarchy the violation of femininity that resistant practices would normally result in was suspended.

Areas of future research

Bourdieu's (1990) concept of the habitus has afforded a sophisticated way to understand the values and attitudes of rural young people. Whilst the economic, cultural and personal consequences of moving away from a small rural town to a larger regional town has been explored in the educational and sociological literature (Fabianson 2006; Stevens 2009; Wierenga 2009), the intense cultural contrast between Simmel's concept of 'an unambiguous image of oneself' and a metropolitan identity could be further explored to fully understand the role of the rural-urban divide in young people's educational choices.

In contrast to most research which sees sport in rural communities as central to the development of cohesion (Atherley 2006; Spaaij 2009), this study adds to a small body of literature which suggests it also contributes to social exclusion (Dempsey 2000; Tonts and Atherley 2005). More research in this area should lead to a better understanding of patterns of inclusion and exclusion in small rural towns, and their connection with educational decisions. It is also crucial to conduct more research into precisely how masculinity is maintained and created through formal and informal sporting events. Although a connection has been made between masculinity and sport in the sociological literature (Connell 2000; Fitzclarence and Hickey 2000), there is little research on how the rural component may influence this connection.

Further research into young men's experiences and responses to schooling is needed to gain a deeper understanding of the complexity of their lives and choices. Whilst resistance to the values of the education system has been investigated in some depth in other ethnographic studies of masculinity and early school leaving (Corbett 2007; Morris 2008, 2012a; Walker

1988; Willis 1977; Connell et al. 1982), the understanding of young males' disengagement with education in a rural context is limited. Furthermore, the feelings of failure and self-blame experienced by the young men in this study is an under-researched area, yet this is a particularly urgent area of further research, as these feelings were detrimental to the young men's aspirations to succeed in education and obtain secure and permanent employment.

The experiences of being marginalised and feeling ignored that many young men and women encountered calls for further research into the impact of hegemonic masculinity on marginalised groups in informal school cultures. There is a pressing need to understand the emotions and experiences of these young individuals in order to successfully address the issues influencing their choices not to continue their education.

The experiences of the ghetto people and their choices demand further research. In contrast to the firm link between class, aspirations and educational decision making (Penman 2004; Teese 2002; Smyth et al. 2000, 2004) individuals from this group of young people were adamant they wanted to continue their education. It is crucial that the experiences underpinning these young people's decision making is explored further to assist them in realising their aspirations.

In exploring the young people's post-school experiences this study taps into the largely unexplored area of early school leavers' aspirations to return to some form of post-compulsory education. The finding that many young people, especially young men, left school with the understanding that they were setting themselves up for failure requires further investigation. It would also be relevant to explore how opportunities for entering the education system later in life could be improved.

Policy implications

This study's focus on understanding the factors underpinning young people's choices to leave the education system early has the potential to inform the development of policies addressing Australia's and Tasmania's relatively low rural retention and completion rates.

Findings from this study suggest that some of the youth and educational policies attempting to construct young people as self-responsible citizens solely responsible for their own choices are detrimental to young people's realisation of their aspirations and potential. There is also a very real concern that the damage inflicted by symbolic violence may hinder young people from re-entering the education system at a later stage, denying them opportunities for long-

term social and economic gain and depriving the labour market of talented and innovative workers. Greater emphasis on aspects of a liberal-democratic discourse may help improve school retention and completion by empowering young people to recognise their own potential and negotiate their own pathways. This approach would also involve reorganising career guidance programs around concepts of labour market insecurity, flexibility and mobility.

The importance of attachment to school through strong student–teacher relationships and the link with successful educational outcomes is established in the literature (Adalsteindottir 2004; Romi et al. 2009; Lingaard et al. 2000; 2002) as well as in this study. However, findings from this study suggest that a greater focus on the gendered dynamics shaping the informal school culture is necessary in order to foster closer student–teacher relationships. Teachers’ lack of awareness of the dominance of hegemonic masculinity in the informal school culture contributed to an increased sense of exclusion for the young people already marginalised in the masculine hierarchy. These young individuals often felt that their efforts at academic study went unnoticed and that their concerns about marginalisation and sexualisation were not taken seriously. These experiences contributed significantly to the decisions to leave school early made by academically successful individuals because ‘everything is better than school’ or ‘we just sit there all day’. Many of these experiences were shared by another group of young women who had decided to continue on to Year 11 ‘to see what happens’. Their relative lack of commitment to their choice to continue their education combined with the lack of strong parental guidance in their stories suggest many of these young women might not continue on to complete Year 12. Understanding the experiences of marginalised young women will therefore also help to understand how to retain this group in education.

Although members of the dominant groups generally enjoyed good relationships with their teachers, an increased focus on gender would need to entail a focus on the contradictory experiences of the young men, their desire to engage with their education and experiences of self-blame and failure. Raising awareness amongst the young men about the role of physicality in their educational experiences and choices might help empower them to embrace their desire to engage with their education.

The detrimental effect of hegemonic masculinity on the young people’s engagement with their education draws attention to the role of gender or ability streaming as a strategy to help

the young people develop their academic skills. Whilst the evidence on the success of this strategy is that it only benefits the highest achievers whilst harming and stigmatising other students (Clarke and Clarke 2008; Oakes 2005; Slavin 1990; Rosenbaum 1980; William and Bartholomew 2004), there is some evidence to suggest that it can also help to optimise young people's educational performance (Bosire, Mondoh and Barmao 2008; Colangelo, Assouline and Gross 2004). Comments such as 'Lauren has to do the work she should have done in class at home because she can't concentrate there' (Mrs Jackson) and 'we do all our schoolwork at home' (Anne, Anita, Nina) provide some evidence for some form of gender based streaming.

Supportive strategies addressing issues of low school retention rates and high levels of youth unemployment would benefit from a focus on the nature of young people's social and cultural networks in the local community and beyond. For example, this study provides evidence that the absence of a broad variety of leisure activities in the small rural town was associated with a high rate of 'hanging around' and significant social isolation expressed in terms of withdrawal from the community, disengagement from school and decisions to leave school early. Increased attention to the importance of leisure in the lives of young rural people may help reduce experiences of 'hanging around' and in turn improve the young people's attachment to schooling and build their confidence to continue their education away from home.

The dominance of sport in the context of a lack of alternative leisure activities was a key factor shaping the young people's experiences of having 'nothing to do' and 'nowhere to go'. Concern with the social problems facing rural Australia is often addressed through sport (McHenry 2009; Tonts 2006), but whilst sport may provide some individuals with meaningful interaction, this study suggests there is a need to establish a more inclusive culture which embraces alternative forms of gender construction. The development of the Arts and cultural activities such as drama and music in rural Australia may be a valuable tool in achieving this through its focus on various forms of self-expression and embodiment. In turn this may also help reduce some young people's experiences of dissonance between the social and cultural capital of the community and the formal school curriculum.

Familiarisation with life in larger population centres is another key strategy which has the potential to increase the young people's mobility by accustoming them to the different lifestyles of larger towns. Such a strategy might be facilitated by the education department through familiarisation with larger population centres and particular exposure to the nearest regional college. Although such approaches have been trialled, some policy makers pointed out that these programs were often only sustained for short periods of time. It is paramount that the process of familiarisation is ongoing through the senior secondary years in order to successfully build relationships between the young people and college staff and students. More informal arrangements such as 'adoption' based programs where rural young people liaise with urban families to become more familiar with the towns they will move to for further education or employment would also help to increase young rural people's awareness of life outside their local communities. It may be possible for programs and initiatives addressing the need to familiarise young rural people with the culture of the larger towns to which they need to relocate to continue their education to tap into the resources of leisure activities such as sports. Involvement in sport, as well as other activities such as music or drama, often includes participation in competitions or events beyond the local area and this could provide important opportunities for the young people to get to know larger regional cities and the people within them better.

A greater emphasis on the importance of place in education is timely. The finding of key studies of education in a rural context (Corbett 2007; Morris 2008; Wierenga 2009) as well as my own research is that Giddens (1991) assertion that place has become 'phantasmagorical' does not fit many rural communities. Place matters, and when young rural people do not feel there is a place for them in education they become disengaged. Ching and Creed's (1997) statement that 'education is the urbanization of the mind' highlights the lack of focus on place-based experiences in education and the need to more carefully incorporate aspects of rural life into the formal education of young people (Farrugia 2014; Farrugia, Smyth and Harrison 2014a and b). There is also a real need to recognise that rural places are porous and not isolated from their broader social context. Acknowledging that young rural people's experiences are already shaped by local, regional and global forces may provide a useful starting point for policies and strategies seeking to assist young rural people in familiarising themselves with the larger regional towns which provide senior secondary education (Massey 1991; Farrugia 2014).

The education department occupies a powerful role as an agent of socialisation, and its role in reversing the continuing rural-urban gap in retention and completion is unique. However, it cannot be incumbent on the education department to initiate change on its own, and a collaborative approach to the issue between health, education, youth services and local government is desirable.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Student interview guide

Open interview, explain what it is about. Obtain Informed consent.

Life in Hillsville

What is it like living in Hillsville?

Some things you like/dislike

How do you spend your time after school

How do you feel about this?

Life outside Hillsville - experiences, views

Grade 10 students making the choice to leave or continue their education

What have you liked/disliked about being at School?

Thoughts on being in Year 10?

How do you feel about your choice to leave/stay?

How did you make the choice?

Who did you talk to about it?

Any pressures to leave or stay?

How do your family and friends feel about your choice?

Views on other Year 10s who are leaving/staying.

Plans for the future

What are your plans?

How did you make your plans (influence from family/school).

Why did you make this choice?

How do you see yourself in the future?

How do you feel about this?

Close Interview, thanking respondents for their participation

Appendix B: Teacher interview guide

Open interview, explain what it is about. Obtain Informed consent.

Life in Hillsville

Strengths and weaknesses of living in a small rural community

Thoughts on being a teacher in a small rural community

What do the young people say about living in Hillsville?

Your own thoughts on living in Hillsville?

Life outside Hillsville - experiences, views

Grade 10 students making the choice to leave or continue their education

Relationships with students and parents

How do you feel about those relationships?

How do students respond to teaching situations?

Are obtaining educational qualifications important to the students?

Do you talk to the students about continuing their education outside the area?

Do the students discuss their decision to leave or continue their education with parents and friends?

Plans for the future

How do the students make their career plans in Grade 10?

Why do they make certain choices?

How do you see the future of those students who leave school early?

Close Interview, thanking respondents for their participation.

Appendix C: Parent interview guide

Open interview, explain what it is about. Obtain informed consent.

Life in Hillsville

Strengths and weaknesses of living in a small rural community

What do you think living in a small rural community is like for your child?

What does your job involve?

How important is family?

How do you spend your leisure time?

Life outside Hillsville - experiences, views

Grade 10 students making the choice to leave or continue their education

How do you feel about your child's choice to leave/stay?

Why do you think he/she made that choice?

Did your child discuss this choice with other people? (parents, friends, teachers)

How relevant are educational qualifications for your child?

What are your own educational experiences?

What is your view on education as a whole?

Your relationship with the school and teachers

Plans for the future

How do you feel about your child's plans for the future?

What has influenced your child to make those plans?

What are your views on this plan?

How do you see your child in the future?

How do you feel about this?

Close Interview, thanking respondents for their participation

Appendix D: Policy maker interview guide

Open interview, explain what it is about. Obtain Informed consent.

Please identify the main policies in relation to reducing early school leaving held by the Education Department.

What are your views on their strengths and weaknesses?

Are any of the policies particularly relevant for rural areas?

How successful have policies been in rural areas?

What are some of the main ongoing concerns?

How do you explain the failure of policies to reduce early school leaving in rural areas?

What is your view on the Pathway concept, and the pathway planning program?

Do you think that increasing the compulsory school age to 17 will benefit students who are non-academically inclined?

Rural students might have different needs from, for example, urban students. How much authority are individual schools given to create their own curriculum?

Close Interview, thanking respondent for their participation.